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**Warning! Contains Spoilers:**  
**Reading post-‘9/11’ US Security  
Discourses through Superhero Films**

**by**  
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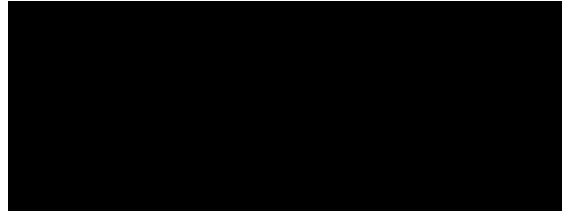
Finally, I want to thank my parents for always supporting me in all my endeavours and adventures.

## Declaration and Inclusion of Material from a Prior Thesis

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Julian Schmid

September 30, 2020



## Abstract

This PhD thesis demonstrates how post-‘9/11’ US security discourses are co-constituted through Hollywood’s superhero genre, specifically the productions of Marvel and DC. In doing so it contributes to important debates within International Relations and Critical Security Studies that address the connections between popular culture and world politics. My interdisciplinary and inter-textual film analysis reveals that artefacts of popular culture have to be seen beyond their merely representational potential; on the contrary, popular culture becomes an important site to make sense of political issues as part of the mundane and the everyday, increasingly blurring the line between *reality* and fiction.

Looking at American history and the development of the American Monomyth shows how superheroes were not created on a blank slate but were already born out of a specific narrative of the American nation in the 1930s. For those past 90 years, superheroes have been constant co-producers of crisis and conflict, making sense of foreign policy to domestic and global audiences. Their reinvigoration since 2001, leading into large-scale productions of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the DC Extended Universe, corresponds with the crisis of ‘9/11’ and the ‘War on Terror’. Throughout the presidencies of Bush, Obama, and Trump they have been shaping the discursive elements of US security and foreign policy. The thesis argues that by engaging with superhero films, not as trivial pieces of entertainment but as important cultural artefacts that co-constitute political reality, scholars might find new ways to make sense of violence and conflict and seek new paths to a more peaceful world.

## Filmography

### Superhero Films, 2000-2020

Year	Title	Director	Production	Film Universe
2000	X-Men	Bryan Singer	Marvel Entertainment The Donners' Company	X-Men
2002	Spider-Man	Sam Raimi	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	Spider-Man trilogy
2003	Daredevil	Mark Steven Johnson	Regency Enterprises Marvel Entertainment	
	X2	Bryan Singer	Marvel Entertainment The Donners' Company	X-Men
	Hulk	Ang Lee	Universal Pictures	
2004	Spider-Man 2	Sam Raimi	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	Spider-Man trilogy
	Catwoman	Pitof	Village Roadshow Pictures Di Novi Pictures	
2005	Elektra	Rob Bowman	Regency Enterprises Marvel Entertainment	
	Batman Begins	Christopher Nolan	Warner Brothers Pictures DC Comics	Dark Knight trilogy
	Fantastic Four	Josh Trank	Constantin Film Marvel Entertainment	
2006	X-Men: Last Stand	Brett Ratner	Dune Entertainment Marvel Entertainment	X-Men
	Superman Returns	Bryan Singer	Legendary Pictures Peters Entertainment	
2007	Spider-Man 3	Sam Raimi	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	Spider-Man trilogy
	Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	Tim Story	Marvel Entertainment 1492 Pictures	
2008	Iron Man	Jon Favreau	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 1
	The Incredible Hulk	Louis Leterrier	Marvel Studios Valhalla Motion Productions	MCU Phase 1
	The Dark Knight	Christopher Nolan	Warner Brothers Pictures DC Comics	Dark Knight trilogy
2009	Watchmen	Zack Snyder	Warner Brothers Pictures Paramount Pictures	
	X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Gavin Hood	Marvel Entertainment The Donner's Company	X-Men
2010	Iron Man 2	Jon Favreau	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 1
2011	Thor	Kenneth Branagh	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 1
	X-Men: First Class	Matthew Vaughn	Marvel Entertainment The Donners' Company	X-Men
	Green Lantern	Martin Campbell	DC Entertainment De Line Pictures	
	Captain America: The First Avenger	Joe Johnston	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 1
2012	The Avengers	Joss Whedon	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 1
	The Amazing Spider-Man	Marc Webb	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	Spider-Man reboot



	The Dark Knight Rises	Christopher Nolan	Warner Brothers Pictures DC Entertainment	Dark Knight trilogy
2013	Iron Man 3	Shane Black	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
	Man of Steel	Zack Snyder	DC Entertainment Legendary Pictures	DCEU
	The Wolverine	James Mangold	Marvel Entertainment The Donners' Company	X-Men
	Thor: The Dark World	Alan Taylor	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
2014	Captain America: The Winter Soldier	Anthony and Joe Russo	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
	The Amazing Spider-Man 2	Marc Webb	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	Spider-Man reboot
	X-Men: Days of Future Past	Bryan Singer	Marvel Entertainment The Donners' Company	X-Men
	Guardians of the Galaxy	James Gunn	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
2015	Avengers: Age of Ultron	Joss Whedon	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
	Ant-Man	Peyton Reed	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
	Fantastic Four	Josh Trank	Marvel Entertainment 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox	
2016	Deadpool	Tim Miller	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox Marvel Entertainment	
	Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice	Zack Snyder	DC Entertainment RatPac Entertainment	DCEU
	Captain America: Civil War	Anthony and Joe Russo	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 2
	X-Men: Apocalypse	Bryan Singer	Marvel Entertainment TSG Entertainment	X-Men
	Suicide Squad	David Ayer	DC Films RatPac Entertainment	DCEU
	Doctor Strange	Scott Derrickson	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
2017	Logan	James Mangold	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox Marvel Entertainment	X-Men
	Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2	James Gunn	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Wonder Woman	Patty Jenkins	DC Films RatPac Entertainment	DCEU
	Spider-Man: Homecoming	Jon Watts	Columbia Pictures Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Thor: Ragnarok	Taika Waititi	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Justice League	Zack Snyder	DC Films RatPac Entertainment	DCEU
2018	Black Panther	Ryan Coogler	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Avengers: Infinity War	Anthony and Joe Russo	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Deadpool 2	David Leitch	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox Marvel Entertainment	
	Venom	Ruben Fleischer	Columbia Pictures Marvel Entertainment	
	Aquaman	James Wan	DC Films	DCEU

			RatPac Entertainment	
2019	Captain Marvel	Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Shazam!	David F. Sandberg	New Line Cinema DC Films	DCEU
	Avengers: Endgame	Anthony and Joe Russo	Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	X-Men: Dark Phoenix	Simon Kinberg	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox Marvel Entertainment	X-Men
	Spider-Man: Far From Home	Jon Watts	Columbia Pictures Marvel Studios	MCU Phase 3
	Joker	Todd Philips	Warner Brothers Pictures DC Films	
2020	Birds of Prey	Cathy Yan	DC Films	DCEU
	New Mutants	Josh Boone	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Studios Marvel Entertainment	X-Men

#### Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)

MCU Phase 1	Iron Man The Incredible Hulk Iron Man 2 Thor Captain America: The First Avengers The Avengers
MCU Phase 2	Iron Man 3 Thor: The Dark World Captain America: The Winter Soldier Guardians of the Galaxy Avengers: Age of Ultron Ant-Man
MCU Phase 3	Captain America: Civil War Doctor Strange Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2 Spider-Man: Homecoming Thor: Ragnarok Black Panther Avengers: Infinity War Ant-Man and the Wasp Captain Marvel Avengers: Endgame Spider-Man: Far From Home

#### DC Extended Universe (DCEU)

DCEU	Man of Steel Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice Suicide Squad Wonder Woman Justice League Aquaman Shazam! Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)
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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

"Is this madness so deep-rooted that force is their only answer? And will they never learn there is always a greater force?" – Galactus in *Fantastic Four* #123, 1977

This PhD project reads the post-September 11, 2001 'War on Terror' as a cultural, social, and political construction that not only continues to impact international affairs, security, and particularly United States foreign policy, but also needs to be narrated, shaped, and framed over and over again. While superheroes have a long cultural history, the main argument of this thesis is that in their contemporary form as highly successful Hollywood blockbuster films they create and deepen specific discourses on security, terrorism, and political violence. In doing so, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the DC Extended Universe, in particular, are important artefacts not only for cultural research but even more so for political research to understand how these discourses are popularised and ultimately normalised.

The quote above by Galactus, the planet devouring villain who also features in the 2007 Marvel film *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, serves as a teaser for the critical analysis of superhero films and their political role throughout the 'War on Terror' that is offered in this thesis. Galactus' rumination on the role of force in his relationship with the Fantastic Four superhero team is an example of how Marvel and other superhero films engage with important questions of how violence is created, who carries it out, and how it is to be perceived in different circumstances – key questions that also occupy scholars in the fields of International Relations, Critical Security Studies, Foreign Policy Analysis, and Terrorism Studies with which this thesis engages.

Most superhero sagas begin with character origin stories, so by a way of a quick personal digression, let me begin by explaining my own origin story as an academic in order to elaborate on what attracted me to this PhD topic. Ultimately, there were three driving forces. First, one of my earliest childhood memories is looking at a cartoon strip in an Austrian newspaper that showed a war zone: Soldiers, firearms, and skeletons. Deeply confused I asked my mother about it and she told me that war was happening not too far from our home, only a few hundred kilometres from us in fact. But I did not get an answer for *why* this was happening; it was incomprehensible to me, partly, I suspect because understandably my mother wanted to shield me from the horrors of war. It was only years later that I read up on the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and the state's bloody disintegration. As an Austrian citizen, growing up in Vienna, I was far removed enough to not be physically affected in any way, but the war surely did something to Austria as a nation and to me as a person. The one question I could not shake was: *why* was this happening? I knew it was impossible that war would just *happen* and instinctively I knew there were some clues or answers to be found in that short comic strip in the newspaper.

Second, a little later in life, I read George Orwell's classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Early in the novel I was made aware of the importance of the media, culture, and arts and the role they play in societal and political life:

This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound-tracks, cartoons, photographs—to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. [...] All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary (Orwell, 2000, p. 18).

Orwell's quote, taken from a longer elaboration of how the different ministries of Oceania link together to create and sustain totalitarian superpower, illustrates how important the cultural influence on politics and policy is through the constitution of ideological and discursive elements that shape the world that Orwell's protagonist Wilson Smith lives in. At the same time, I learnt not only about the effort going into the cultural (and thus political) control of everything societal and political but also, how politics and history are ever-changing, fluid categories rather than fixed elements.

Thirdly, at the beginning of my PhD project, I realised that popular culture is still often not considered a serious thing by members of the Ivory Tower. Yes, there are many great scholars working on it, but I heard the following introduction to conference papers in one way or another more than once: 'Hi, it's really great to be here today and to talk about \*insert any given popular culture topic\*, which was really fun to do because actually I am working on genocide/terrorism/financial collapse.' These words, or statements like them, spoken over and over again at conferences and even in books and articles, never made me doubt my project but I became curious (and still am) as to why the engagement with popular culture seems to require academics to offer an apologetic justification for their research, as if an engagement with popular culture makes you look lazy, dumb or, worse still, unfit to be an academic. Yet again I got confused because, for example, genocide surely does not start with genocide.

While those three personal experiences illustrated above – questions about war in my childhood, my own cultural development, and my academic conference experiences – are not an exhaustive list of what attracted me to this topic, they surely helped me question common sense understandings of theory, history and politics as well as popular culture and the links between them all. Being critical at all times and understanding *reality* as a textual interplay rather than a given then became a crucial part of my understanding as an undergraduate and later in my academic work. In this sense, they were central to my mindset and ultimately led to the production of this PhD thesis.

The issue of history and politics is reflected by Walter Benjamin and his contemplations, metaphorically aligned with the angel of history who is "looking as though he is about to move away from something

he is fixedly contemplating. [A] storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (W. Benjamin, 1969, pp. 257-258). What Benjamin suggests here is that while we are unable to see the future, the past can only be perceived from the present while the observer moves further and further away from the object he or she is observing. The horrific realisation of being removed from the object of interest while one's vision is diluted by events of the present reveals how history and politics need to be analysed with this knowledge rather than with the arrogance that the present meant some enlightened place from which scholars can easily observe and judge events of the past in its alleged accuracy or authenticity. But if we were to look at where specific forms of knowledge about the politics of historical events are being produced, we might realise that just as analysing the past, analysing history requires a form of analysis that deviates from seeing it as a given object that merely needs to be recorded. To acknowledge this circumstance means to open up the analytical landscape to a variety of questions previously (or actually) ignored or marginalised. It is the acknowledgement that "the messy immeasurable power of ideas, ideals, and cultural identities is often as strong a driving force in human affairs as the fists we fear and the food we crave" (Billington, 1992, p. 102).

This introduction aims to present four crucial points that will position my thesis epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically. First, I will present the research design and my primary research questions. I will demonstrate why the thesis is important in the questions it asks and the original contribution it can make to the fields of International Relations (IR) and Critical Security Studies (CSS). Second, I will present a coherent literature review of the works primarily engaged with the connections between popular culture and world politics, superheroes, and the cultural and cinematic co-production of political reality; this is to say all those debates that help me contextualise and position my research agenda. Third, I will present the core concepts and theoretical assumptions that drive my analysis, mostly drawing on post-structuralist IR and CSS theory in order to methodologically position my thesis. Fourth, I will provide a short roadmap through the thesis which aims to serve as a point of orientation and argumentative thread throughout the whole thesis.

### Research design

The thesis focuses on the post-September 11, 2001 or '9/11' period and the so-called 'War on Terror'. Specifically, it looks at the way both have been culturally constructed in order to become political and historical reality. I propose that '9/11' was not a singular event that *changed everything* in US society and US engagement in international affairs, even though many American policymakers and a large part of both US and global audiences to the event itself might have perceived it that way, and perhaps still do. Following the wide array of literature making a convincing case that the 'War on Terror' was neither necessary nor inevitable (Baudrillard, 2003; Croft, 2006; R. Jackson, 2005; McCrisken, 2012), I am

interested in the way that the ensuing two decades have been shaped not only by the ‘War on Terror’ and changing security and foreign policy landscapes, but also the ways these landscapes have been shaped, authored, and called to life.

This project will contribute to a growing body of literature that addresses the deeply intertwined nature of popular culture and world politics (Grayson, Davies, & Philpott, 2009; Robert A. Saunders & Vlad Strukov, 2018). While my project is situated at the interdisciplinary crossroads of CSS, IR, US Foreign Policy, and Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) and their debates over the importance of popular culture and the way global audiences negotiate political reality, it also extends across the fields of Critical Geopolitics, History, Cultural and Film Studies, Sociology, and Psychology. This realisation is important because it gives an impression of how widespread the epistemological and ontological influence of popular culture goes, how it encompasses everyday life and political institutions while at the same time being widely omitted and to some extent ridiculed as a subject of serious scholarly analysis. When Jason Dittmer argues that academia has “a schizophrenic relationship with popular culture” (2015, p. 47) then surely this applies even more to the analysis of security and international affairs. The default position towards popular culture in the studies of security affairs is rather self-conscious and apologetic; and who could blame those academics perceiving popular culture as trivial, mere entertainment, and an inauthentic replication of what *real* politics conveys? Some might use cultural artefacts in their teaching, as a *fun* activity to make the *real* political content more approachable (Fey, Poppe, & Rauch, 2016). Again, especially CSS and IR scholars of the *real stuff*, of genocide, war, the military, states, markets, nuclear deterrence, and intelligence seem to be “eschewing both the depths of low politics and the shallows of a frivolous popular culture” (Weldes, 2003a, p. 5). However, this caution (if not to say refusal) around analysing global politics as standing in relation with popular culture does not acknowledge the fact that for most people nuclear confrontation, terrorism, or intelligence and espionage are first and foremost experienced through popular culture (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017; McCrisken & Moran, 2018). When people think about spying, they might think about James Bond, when they think about Wall Street they might think about Gordon Gekko or Leonardo de Caprio’s *Wolf of Wall Street*, or they will equate Sherlock Holmes with detective work. Whatever the subject, public consciousness strongly (or even automatically) connects the *real* and the fictional. Ultimately, film and television help create the discursive realm within which world politics operates (Jack Holland, 2019; Oldham, 2017).

Texts that may not explicitly reveal political content are nonetheless deeply political in the way they are being produced, distributed, and received. Thus, my analysis of popular culture artefacts not only encompasses those areas that have a direct, immediately recognisable link to politics, but also those that engage with contemporary political themes in a more indirect way. To exemplify this point, let us

look at two popular TV series, *House of Cards* (2013-2018) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). The first series illustrates the inner life of US politics and the Democratic Party. Important dramaturgical elements include the White House, Congress, the media, politicians, state structures and institutions, power struggles, etc. These elements seem clearly connected to *real* political institutions, processes, and the state and are easily identifiable as such. The analysis of this series, especially in the context of the 2016 US presidential election, can be quite intriguing. How US politics is being introduced, how institutions and the media are being portrayed and which actions are being legitimised could be fruitful for the political researcher. The latter series, *Game of Thrones*, is constituted of elements from Fantasy and Science Fiction. Kings, queens, knights, and fools dominate the narrative just as dragons, magic and ice zombies do. The endemic power struggles seem to be a link to *House of Cards* while most of the text seems pretty much separated. I would argue, however, that both series still appeal to and use material from the same discursive realm. Ultimately, it does not seem important whether the characters are senators or kings and if the state is structured like a democracy or a number of fantastical competing city states, nor whether destructive military power is meted out by fighter jets or fire-breathing dragons. Both texts convey – merely in a different fashion – images and interpretations of sovereignty, dominance, war, and strategy. Audiences integrate both types of texts into their own reference systems whether the texts appear more or less *real* or fictional.

Another example would be the two films *Ides of March* (2011) and *Finding Nemo* (2003). While *Ides of March* could be compared to *House of Cards* in large part, being narratively implemented in an American state-political context, *Finding Nemo* is an animated children's film seemingly with no connection to the world of politics. In the first film, the dominant dramaturgical categories are the Democratic Party, the US president, the media and power. The second film, apart from the abduction of the disabled son and the pursuit undertaken by the father, includes themes such as the constitution and hierarchisation of a multi-cultural society, patriarchal gender relations, violence, discipline, education and control, ecology and security. Even though prima facie the two films do not seem to have anything in common, both actually adopt political positions which the audience implements into their own everyday experience. The latter might even be considered to do this on a deeper level because the audience will be largely disarmed into thinking consciously that they are *merely* watching a children's animation. Hence, the texts work as ideological tools, even when they are disguised as innocent entertainment. This is to say that it becomes especially interesting to focus on those aspects of a film that come across as non-political and non-ideological while at the same time “both the images and the narratives are saturated with ideology and polysemic meanings” (Kellner, 1993, p. 147).

Accordingly, I will focus on superhero films in my analysis as they are not only an ever-growing cinematic genre, booming commercially since 2001, but furthermore a political artefact reaching way beyond the

pages of comic books or the silver screen. As I will demonstrate, superheroes are an ideal carrier for dominant narratives and themes of our time, the 'War on Terror', questions of security and safety, as well as crisis and violence because they are an integral part of the American nation, ingrained into its origin and founding myths (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002; Slotkin, 1992). Furthermore, they (re-)appear as moral and political institutions whenever crisis and turmoil are looming. While they address political issues and open up questions about the legitimate use of violence, they are at the same time removed enough from the 'War on Terror' to be equally read as harmless entertainment.

### Research question and contribution

This project aims to answer the following research question: How does Hollywood superhero cinema, specifically the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, co-constitute post-'9/11' US security discourses? The aim is not to focus on popular culture as an end in itself; but rather to carve out the political and ideological implications of cinematic texts and the identities they promote.

Methodologically, the thesis draws on post-structural approaches to IR and CSS while I aim to position myself within the literature that has successfully engaged with global politics, terrorism, security, and popular culture. By analysing the 'War on Terror' as crucially shaped by popular culture and the superhero genre I aim to make important contributions to the field. First, by focusing on the cinematic connections to politics and vice versa I will substantiate the role of film in the discipline. Second, this will also help to re-formulate currently vague connections of IR to concepts of aesthetics, narrative, and representation. Third, my focus on world politics and security will expand the understanding of how the tropes and mechanisms that currently underpin security and surveillance discourses are being negotiated, popularised, legitimised and normalised. Fourth, by focusing on '9/11' and post-'9/11' cinema I will be able to re-think concepts of crisis and history as well as to explore the connections between Hollywood and the political realm. Fifth, by engaging with the superhero genre and its global popularity I will be able to contribute to contemporary discussions about the changing and contested nature of heroism and national identity. Methodologically I aim to develop recent attempts to design a political film analysis further, and in doing so to locate epistemological spaces for popular culture within IR and CSS. This also entails exploring the role of inter-textuality as an analytical tool. In short, this is a thesis that is about much more than superhero films per se.

### Literature review

The significance of popular culture for International Relations and world politics has been tackled from various disciplinary and sub-disciplinary angles in recent years. In this section, I will give an impression of the work that has been done and situate my own contribution and analysis in it. First, I will address the array of literature that was mostly produced in the past 20-30 years that speaks directly to the connections between popular culture and world politics. Second, I will talk about the work on security,



US foreign policy, and terrorism that I will be drawing on. Third, I will sketch out the literature on superheroes and probe to what extent that literature opens up the epistemological space for my analysis.

### Popular culture and world politics

The key argument of the works about popular culture and world politics lies within the assumption that rather than being two separate spheres that only coincidentally or occasionally intersect, both spheres demonstrate not only similarities, linkages, and parallels but both are rather essentially and existentially tied, working as a nexus or continuum (Grayson et al., 2009; Hamilton & Shepherd, 2016; Weldes, 2003b). In this sense, we might even think of popular culture and politics as a beguiling hall of mirrors in an amusement park, where it is often difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Artefacts of popular culture also function as language, code, grammar or script alongside which political and historical realities are being shaped and produced (Dittmer, 2005; Kiersey & Neuman, 2013; Robert A Saunders & Vlad Strukov, 2018; Weber, 2006).

Scholars concerned about geopolitics and the way specific realities are created through cultural interventions have tapped into crucial issues early on, positing that “[i]f popular culture does not matter for geopolitics, a lot of people are going to a lot of trouble to contest it for nothing” (Dittmer, 2010 xvii). On the contrary, popular culture “functions as an increasingly deterritorialised medium for inculcating as well as contesting established norms of geopolitics” (Robert A Saunders, 2019, p. 717). Joanne Sharp criticises traditional understandings of geopolitical questions as having a mimetic notion of the world, that is to say, a mostly positivist approach to how knowledge of the world is being produced (1993, 1996). Building on earlier works by post-structuralist scholars (Ashley, 1984; R. B. J. Walker, 1986, 1989), critical geopolitics scholars are still very much concerned with geography as “earth-writing” (Tuathail, 1996, p. 2) which renders geography, spaces and territorialities not as something static but rather as a process, shaped by discourses and ideologies and produced through narratives and images. Simon Dalby identifies imperialism and culture as important sites of geopolitical discourses that rely on “the events of 9/11 when the geography of danger coalesced into an explicitly imperial imaginary of war against a ‘global’ threat” (2008, p. 414).

The territorial and ideological divisions made in the aftermath of ‘9/11’ such as the ‘War on Terror’ or the ‘Axis of Evil’ were to some extent preceded by geopolitical discursive figures of the Cold War, insisting on alleged clear-cut Manichean distinctions between what is good and evil along gendered and racialised lines. Geographical framing, then, is “an essential element of this form of geopolitical discourse and has arguably become more so following 9/11, as the world is divided into zones (for instance, the axis of evil) and dangers identified and located therein” (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008, p. 438). Popular culture offers the mythological and symbolic elements of national identities to a wide range of

audiences and can help them to navigate their own identities around, between and in collective ones as well as vis-à-vis a broader geopolitical narrative or script (Blieseemann de Guevara, 2016; Dittmer, 2005; Innayatullah & Dauphinee, 2016).

Kitchen and Kneale make a case for the analysis of specific genres such as science fiction and the way imaginative geographies and urban futures are being developed, negotiated and purported through the displacements and discontinuities within the text. Popular culture, in this case science fiction, “thus creates a cognitive space, an estrangement between real and fictional worlds, which the reader must negotiate” (2001, p. 21). This is not too dissimilar from the object of my own analysis, the superhero genre, as it also takes different societal, technological, and political elements some of which are addressing current political affairs more openly than others. Jutta Weldes analyses how popular culture helps to popularise and normalise globalisation specifically in the way of the “narrative of historical inevitability grounds globalisation’s self-fulfilling prophecy” (2001, p. 651).

Various scholars have attempted to engage with artefacts of popular culture to carve out their political significance beyond using them as merely illustrative material (Takacs, 2015; van Munster & Sylvest, 2015; van Zoonen, 2005) by looking at science fiction or fantasy (Kiersey & Neuman, 2013; Kiersey & Neumann, 2015; Nexon & Neuman, 2006; Ruane & James, 2008; Weldes, 2003b; L. D. Young & Ko, 2020). However, some of those works, also including interesting work on IR and zombies (Drezner, 2015; Morrisette, 2014) or broader aspects of popular culture and world politics (Buzan, 2010; W. W. Dixon, 2004; Dunnett, 2009), as interesting and valuable as they might be, more or less explicitly insist on the distinction between the *real* as the primary giver of ideas which are represented or mirrored by cultural artefacts. Occasionally the proposition of popular culture as a source of knowledge remains implicit or only occurs after a long justification of why trivial entertainment might be worth investigating. This is by no means limited to the logic of publications but can also be seen in the way academia prioritises specific forms of teaching over others or, as another example, in the way conference programmes and panels are organised, more often than not engaging self-consciously with popular culture. In her comprehensive analysis on security and gender, Nicole Detraz waits until the conclusion to say that “[r]eferencing Harry Potter may seem trivial, but it illustrates both that concepts are not set in stone, and that popular culture, the media, and other agents of socialization have an important role to play in shaping how we understand the world around us” (2012, p. 211).

However, my interdisciplinary analysis is positioned close to those who have contributed to IR or CSS by underlining the importance of specific artefacts for world politics such as literature (L. Bell, 2017; Edkins, 2013; Starnes, 2017) TV and film (Davies, 2010; Davies & Philpott, 2012; Hanska, 2014; Lacy, 2003; Philpott, 2010; Randall, 2011) or social media (Crilley, 2016; Hamilton & Shepherd, 2016; S. R.

Jackson, 2016). Kyle Grayson analyses Paddington Bear and his political significance as stemming “from his position as a high-profile migrant for over 50 years, serving as a performative conduit of English (national) identity as liberal, tolerant and caring” (2013, p. 379). This is important for my own analysis as superheroes do share for the most part a very long history and circulate well beyond comic books or films alone, touching upon a variety of media and cultural discourses that are prevalent in these bodies of literature.

Scholars concerned with history, security and US foreign policy are also aware of the connections between popular culture and politics. Quite often, the discussion around popular culture, and specifically film, is one about to what extent the material authentically displays and mirrors political events. One might think of how far *Schindler's List* (1993) offers an accurate representation of the Holocaust or to what extent *Lincoln* (2012) displays the *reality* of the messy politics of the US Civil War. The proposition that film is often positioned “as secondary to the intellectual concerns of IR assumes that films exist somewhere outside the ‘real’ world of politics, and can only ever represent that world to us. Furthermore, within this framework, films can only be considered ‘good’ if they represent that ‘real’ world accurately” (Lisle, 2003, p. 135). Munslow argues in a similar way, saying that “[c]ommon sense seems to imply that history is distinguishable from invention in that the reality of the past is revealed (in ‘the good history’ text) precisely because it is not created by that text” (2015, p. 31). Custen argues, however, that focusing on the question of accuracy in film “is to accept that such a condition exists, and that it is disinterested, rather than ideologically motivated” (1992, p. 11). The question of whether Hollywood films are historically correct has been of interest to many different audiences over the years but it misses the point. As McCrisken and Pepper argue:

While we share the concerns of critics and academics who accuse many Hollywood historical films of bias and misrepresentation, such views also run the risk of problematically insisting upon history and the historical record as fixed, inviolate and unchanging. After all, historians who berate Hollywood films for falsification should perhaps ask whether the historical record that they are using as an evaluative yardstick is necessarily as secure and uncontested as they imagine (2005, p. 3)

This brings us back to the question of how knowledge is being produced within IR or CSS about the world they aim to look at. Competing narratives and interpretations of memory about presumably clear-cut historical and political issues (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017; Steele, 2013, 2015) are at the centre of these debates which furthermore demonstrates that history does not simply run its inevitable course. Croft and Moore insist that the attacks of September 11, 2001 did not simply change the way security and US foreign policy concerns were thought about, but claim that it was a political choice (2010) to interpret the terroristic act and the response in the form of the ‘War on Terror’

(Croft, 2006). This furthermore suggests a “relationship between identity, narrative and security” (Croft, 2012, p. 17; Lebow, 2016).

Authors have underlined the importance of popular culture and film for the making of US foreign policy (Alford, 2010; I. Scott, 2000). It can also potentially create a common sense across political camps and more widely outside of the US about how the ‘War on Terror’ should be fought (Coyne, 2008; Dodds, 2008; Lise & Pepper, 2005; McSweeney, 2014). This tradition goes back longer, of course, tying Hollywood and Washington, DC intrinsically together, demonstrating a long tradition of interlinkages between Hollywood, associated outlets, intelligence organisations, the Department of Defense (DoD) and many more elements of government (Giglio, 2010; McCrisken & Moran, 2018; Robb, 2004; Schou, 2016). Tony Shaw’s analysis of the Cold War, for example, finds that

The key protagonists in this gargantuan battle for hearts and minds were the mass media. The press, radio, television and film devised and disseminated a barrage of words, sounds and images which helped not only to frame the Cold War, but which also told people what and whom to believe. Cinema’s potency derived principally from its purported ability to *show* audiences the reality of the Cold War from the very outset of the conflict (Shaw, 2007, p. 366)

This was not bound to change in the course of the ‘War on Terror’ because it is still the case that “[s]uccessive US administrations thought that winning the hearts and minds of those at home was every bit as important as those overseas” (Shaw, 2007, p. 3).

The question is rather which narratives of US foreign policy are being distributed and, consequently, how they were being produced and embedded within the political system. As Moulin argues: “Narratives tell us a lot about the limits and possibilities of political life, since they articulate particular worldviews, create and enable certain political subjects, and (re)produce specific understandings about facts, relations and peoples” (2016, p. 138). The Rambo films starring Sylvester Stallone, for example, are argued to have been co-constitutive of the muscular foreign policy agenda of the Reagan presidency and its overarching tropes, as well as being a global cultural phenomenon which was even watched by anti-Marcos rebels on the Philippines in their hideouts. For Cynthia Enloe this example demonstrates how *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) “has slipped quickly into the global lingo of adults as well as children, of militarism’s critics as well as its enthusiasts” (1988, p. 71; Susan Jeffords, 1994). Consequently, *Rambo* proved to be highly successful in globally promoting a militarised version of Reaganite masculinity and US foreign policy.

Even more so, popular culture in its intertextual nature does not merely reflect and mirror history and politics (Carter & Dodds, 2014). History and social, political and economic developments are never this clear-cut or inevitably leading to the developments that are being perceived as common knowledge. It is (popular) culture that creates those narratives that help to make sense of events and that in turn help

in shaping their *reality*. While some might see Pearl Harbor and '9/11' as inherently connected in their infamy and impact (Litwak, 2002), Cynthia Weber points towards the inherent danger of treating them as part of a historical continuum, as standing in tradition with each other, because it would risk imposing the same meaning on disparate events by conflating them and their causes. However, it is not only unclear where histories relate and deviate from each other, but also "*interpretations* of historical narratives and their popular signifying forms are so crossed and confused with one another that attempting to police fact from fiction is not only likely to fail" (2006, pp. 11-12). What this section has demonstrated is that the potential of popular culture as a political artefact can come from a variety of places. These literatures also provide a great theoretical and empirical frame for my own research.

### Security, terrorism, and US Foreign Policy

The '9/11' attacks and the resulting 'War on Terror' play a pivotal role for this project as they cast IR and CSS as heavily concerned with issues of terrorism, the state of exception, and endemic, infinite occurrences of violence and war. Narratives of '9/11' immediately after the attacks, as well as now almost 20 years later, have treated the event as a unique schism with everything that preceded it, as a rupture within IR and a turning point not only for US foreign policy but for the meaning of safety and security as global struggles (Croft, 2006; J. Greenberg, 2003). As Peoples and Vaughan-Williams put it, the

invocation of this date as a turning point between 'old' and 'new' eras is politically significant because it has been regularly cited by the US administration as a justification for a range of responses to the threat of international terrorism that includes military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rolling out of new homeland security measures at home and abroad, and a battery of counter-terrorism policies and practices (2010, p. 8)

The consequences of this specific implementation of the awareness that things are different now meant that "[p]ractices once considered inhumane or exceptional, designed for the control of 'dangerous classes', are becoming normalised" (Weber & Lacy, 2011, p. 1032). It is in the purview of this project to engage with specific narratives produced within the superhero genre that demonstrate the dangerous normalisations happening during the 'War on Terror', the specific form of security it legitimises and popularises (Agamben, 2005; Huysmans, 2006; R. Jackson, 2005).

The way the narrative of the events unfolded led to specific definitions of terrorism that were hard to escape from in the years to come. As one aspect, surveillance also became a crucial means of this discourse, as well as being inherently complicit with popular culture. As David Lyon argues, it

may seem, strikingly, in the TV footage of 9/11 (where the many watched the few), which helped to establish in public opinion the notion that more surveillance (where the few watch the many) is required if terrorism is to be combated successfully [...] so knowing how surveillance is framed in popular culture forms such as film should at least be a rough guide to public perceptions (Lyon, 2013, p. 140)

Through watching and observing artefacts of popular culture (in Lyon's case with a specific focus on film due to its visual meaning) audiences do not only learn about surveillance but also get into the habit of watching, even voyeurism, which is a dominant feature of contemporary surveillance instruments. I will engage with this crucial duality between panopticism and synopticism below in my conceptual framework.

This also affects how we think about security in general. It seems one of the most significant features of how security apparatuses are set up and perceived in the everyday is that security as surveillance turns into a permanent panoptic feature while being accepted and, even more so, embraced by those being surveilled which applies to virtually anybody. The result is a system that potentially watches everyone at potentially every minute of the day (Foucault, 1991), unfolding its disturbing power even when no one is actually watching. But as Bauman and Lyon point out, these modern means of surveillance are at least to a wide extent not rejected or only carefully accepted but embraced:

[T]he old panoptical nightmare ('I am never on my own') now recast into the hope of 'never again being alone' (abandoned, ignored and neglected, blackballed and excluded), the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed [...] The condition of being watched and seen has thereby been reclassified from a menace into a temptation (2013, p. 23)

While I will address the issue brought up by Bauman and Lyon further below, the point here is that while the debate within CSS has addressed the meaning of discourse through language (Buzan, Waeber, & de Wilde, 1998; D. Campbell, 1998; Cohn, 1987; Huysmans, 2011), this has been very much extended by an increased engagement with visuality and virtuality, especially concerning warfare and the military (Der Derian, 2000; Ignatieff, 2000; P. W. Singer, 2009). Analyses about the connections between the military-industrial entertainment complex (Der Derian, 2009; Löffmann, 2013) or the connections between the military and video games (Hirst, 2019; N. Robinson, 2016; N. Robinson & Schulzke, 2016) have deepened this point. While some have argued that the realm of war, military, and security has increasingly changed into a range of imaginaries, myths, fantasies, and endless virtual strategies and strategy games (Grant & Ziemann, 2018; Kaldor, 1990), others have brought Jean Baudrillard to the assessment of the Gulf War that it had not taken place, since "the war was won in advance, we will never know what it would have been like had it existed" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 61).

Visuality, aesthetics, virtuality, and visibility are then crucial factors of questions of war and security, especially in the 'War on Terror' and the move to ever more surveillance and drone warfare. The fantasy of seeing everything while being unseen has almost materialised and becomes a major concern in contemporary security discourses, while "contemporary battlespace, a domain increasingly coterminous with the globe, is submitted to the intense survey of a *martial gaze* that threatens anything that falls under it with obliteration" (Bousquet, 2018, p. 2). Ultimately, while security and (military)

violence are increasingly and inherently connected to artefacts of culture and visibility (Bleiker, 2018b; Heck & Schlag, 2013; Lisle, 2004; Vuori, 2010), the proliferation and circulation of images exceed by far those areas that might be obvious to audiences (Särmä, 2018; Shim & Nabers, 2013). That is to say that the cultural, the aesthetic but also, in this context, the visual is intrinsic and essential to the way experiences are shaped. Moreover, they are essential in the way academics make sense of IR theory and its epistemes (Grayson & Mawdsley, 2019).

Cinema and film provide a great medium for narrative and aesthetics to connect to powerful political artefacts. The visual or aesthetic turn in IR (Bleiker, 2001; Mitchell, 1994) opens the disciplinary space and pushes the normative boundaries of what IR and CSS can and should engage with (Moore & Shepherd, 2010). Roland Bleiker argues that

[A]esthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics. Some of the most significant theoretical and practical insight into world politics emerges not from endeavours that ignore representation, but from those that explore how representative practices themselves have come to constitute and shape political practices (2001, p. 510)

He juxtaposes the aesthetic with the mimetic, that is to say a positivist understanding of IR. Accordingly, film can (and should) only work as mirroring *reality* as opposite to proper theory. The traditional canon of IR, however, “has built a life out of the transformation of fictions, like the immutability of human nature and the apodictic threat of anarchy, into facticity” (Der Derian, 2009, p. 36). In doing so the concept of *reality* within IR and CSS has turned into “an object of desire” (Bleiker, 2001, p. 511).

The overall argument of this literature is that “things, structures, and agency contribute to the complex ways that the international is produced, felt, understood, and experienced” (Grayson, 2016b, p. 326; Salter, 2015). The meaning and function of visual and narrative aspects for IR and CSS has indeed changed over the last decades, images are everywhere, invented, altered, manipulated, distributed and circulated with ever faster speed. This is to say that images “surround everything we do. This omnipresence of images is political and has changed fundamentally how we live and interact in today’s world” (Bleiker, 2018a, p. 1). This omnipresence of visualities in connection with competing narrative structures also impacts how scholars of IR should address issues such as security. Creating visualities and narratives, both on and offline, crucially shapes how global audiences make sense of security issues. For example, what “is thought of as an existential threat and therefore justifies responses that go beyond normal political practices” (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010, p. 77). While research on language has long been part of security studies, especially its critical variant, extending this to visual and aesthetic research seems fruitful since “by failing to analyse popular visual language as integral to global communications, disciplinary IR risks misunderstanding contemporary subjectivity, spatiality, and temporality” (Weber, 2008). Raising visual representation from its status of passivity and to think

about its ability to shape and (co-)constitute security is key (Hansen, 2011, 2015). This is to say that “since political communication becomes increasingly entwined with the production and transmission of visual images, the processes of securitization take on forms, dynamics, and institutional linkages that cannot be fully assessed by focusing on the speech-act alone” (M. C. Williams, 2003, p. 512). Addressing the limitations of analyses that only operate on one level can then also open up the question of where silences lie within IR (Guillaume, 2018; Hansen, 2000).

This also opens up questions about the connections between politics and representation. The latter should not be seen, however, as a process that merely reflects what is happening in the world outside where *real* knowledge is produced. On the contrary, representation is an intrinsic and flexible process that happens on a daily basis and permanently in everyday experiences. Moreover, they largely exist in the eye of the beholder. Thus, representations are always partial and open for interpretation. More than assuming there was a form of *truth* or *reality* out there or, as contrary assumption, that there was no such thing as *reality*, rendering all research nihilistic, “it is more fruitful to consider the ways in which representations are electively deployed in ways that have real impacts on the ‘real world’” (Dittmer, 2010, p. 49). What this thesis illustrates is how popular culture, and specifically the cinematic superhero genre, has the power to negotiate, popularise, legitimise and normalise discourses at all times. Douglas Kellner argues that we live in a world in which media dominate leisure and culture. Media culture is thus the dominant force and site of culture in contemporary societies [...]. Media culture is also the site where battles are fought for the control of society.” (Kellner, 1995, p. 35)

The period since ‘9/11’ has only proven the point made by the literature so far. This does not come as a surprise given how the ‘9/11’ attacks were themselves already a (tele-)visual event. According to Judith Butler, “to prove that events are real, one must already have a notion of the real within which one operates, a set of exclusionary and constitutive principles which confer on a given indication the force of an ontological designator” (Butler, 1990, p. 107). In the reading of some, political events then unfold as “actualizations of reality” (Bleiker, 1998, p. 480). Another way of saying this would be “that in the absence of story-telling devices, there would be no meaningful event” (Devetak, 2009a, p. 795) since *reality* and the *reality* of events “cannot stand as something in itself, independent from the meaning that it acquires though [sic] our perceptions of it and our attempts to comprehend and describe these perceptions” (Bleiker, 1998, p. 480). Jenny Edkins argues similarly that “the events of the day have to be presented in a news bulletin as ‘a breaking story’ – again with a logic and a coherence that events do not in themselves possess” (2013, p. 284).

The event of ‘9/11’ itself then and its aftermath were not straight-forward or inevitable (Croft, 2006; Edkins, 2002; R. Jackson, 2005, 2015a). Lending a helping hand, “just as popular culture helped shape



our reaction to the events of 9/11 – for better or worse – so too does it now inform our collective memory of those events” (Aslan, 2010 xii-xiii). The *correct* interpretation and memorialisation of the event, the trauma, crisis, the struggle to find meaning and a way forward, ultimately leading into the ‘War on Terror’ as a transition into a “highly dubious fantasy” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 21) had to be forged and shaped (Heller, 2005; Jack Holland, 2009; Jack Holland & Solomon, 2014; Zehfuss, 2003). As Stuart Croft argues: “The ‘war on terror’ emerged as the dominant discourse through the crisis of 2001. And this is because of the success in being able to produce a narrative that proved more socially powerful than any other” (Croft, 2006, p. 58).

The same applies, however, to the construction of *the terrorist*, terrorism and counter-terrorism. The seismic event of ‘9/11’ quickly implemented inescapable logics and vague concepts that would collapse under any form of closer scrutiny but somehow found their way into a collective common sense, fitting well into, as I will argue further below, a post-modern era and its neo-liberal zeitgeist. As David L. Altheide puts it “Terrorism became a perspective, an orientation, and a discourse for ‘our time’, the ‘way things are today,’ and ‘how the world has changed’” (Altheide, 2010, p. 15). As I will argue from here on, terrorism in its specific form after ‘9/11’ and the acts of violence perpetrated in the name of or against terrorism had a paradoxical effect that is still prevalent in the way US foreign policy and world politics operate. That is to say that the meaning given to the event of ‘9/11’ had to be constantly reinvoked and its images and narratives re-produced while in every action of American administrations since then, there is the desire to reinterpret, resignify, and ultimately erase ‘9/11’; both of these aspects lead to a dehistorisation and depolitisation of security and its discourses. Sheldon S. Wolin points out, in “the aftermath of September 11 the American citizen was propelled into the realm of mythology, a new and different dimension of being, unworldly, where occult forces are bent on destroying a world that had been created for the children of light” (2008, p. 10). Counter-terrorism was from the beginning of the ‘War on Terror’ a product of fantasy and fiction (while crucially not assumed as such) (S. H. Jones & Clarke, 2006; Zulaika, 2012, 2014), a self-fulfilling prophecy (Zulaika, 2009) that displays a variety of epistemological birth-defects as to “conceive of the epistemological crisis of counterterrorism as an identifiable epistemic posture towards knowledge about, as well as a way of acting towards, the terrorist threat” (R. Jackson, 2015b, p. 34). As I will argue in the following chapters, the naturalised and normalised character of the ‘War on Terror’ remains valid and alive, through the presidencies of Bush, Obama, and Trump and through other pressing issues such as climate change, economic depressions or most recently the Covid-19 pandemic; the ontological lens that the ‘War on Terror’ implemented remains. Angharad Closs Stephens, analysing Obama’s counter-terrorism policy, argues in a similar vein:

This statement that the War on Terror is now at an *end*, whether it is made from a progressive or a conservative standpoint, keeps us tied in to an idea that the War on Terror somehow

represents a break or exceptional departure from the dominant rhetoric and practices of world politics, rather than an escalation of ways of seeing the world that were already present and available (2012, p. 62).

### Superheroes

American superheroes appeal to a wide range of audiences on a global scale and even those who do not watch the films or have never read the comic books are likely to know about them, their imagery is so ubiquitous. It is evident that themes of (super)heroism and mythologically charged narratives are present in any national history (Reynolds, 1992; R. A. Saunders, 2017). However, this thesis engages with American superheroes as they offer specific explanations to the way America is conceiving itself. This is in no way an insinuation that they are more important than other heroic constructions but I will rather carve out the specific role superheroes have been playing in an American context and for American security and foreign policy.

Various academic and semi-academic engagements have opened moral and philosophical questions surrounding superheroes (Berninger, Ecke, & Haberkorn, 2010; Darowski, 2012; DeTora, 2009; Francis, 2020; D. Greene & Roddy, 2015; Grossman, 1976; Housel & Wisniewski, 2009; McLaughlin, 2005; Morris & Morris, 2005; Morrison, 2011; Peaslee & Weiner, 2015, 2012; Peters, 2015; Polley, 2013; Predelli, 2004; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013; M. D. White, 2014, 2013; Zimmerman, 2004), demonstrating the multifaceted nature and the long history of these characters. Quite often authors preface their own fandom (Alsford, 2006; Bukatman, 2003; Davis, 2018; Ndalianis, 2009). While the interest of IR and CSS in specific questions of security and foreign policy changed after '9/11' so did the superhero literature, some of which looked for representations of the 'War on Terror' within the comics and the films (M. J. Costello & Worcester, 2014; DiPaolo, 2011; Hagley & Harrison, 2014; J. A. Hughes, 2006; Packard, 2011; K. M. Scott, 2015; Smith & Goodrum, 2011).

Other aspects that different scholars have engaged with are race, gender and sexuality, and how those concepts are negotiated within superheroic texts. This includes reflections about corporeality, the body, superheroes of colour such as Black Panther, Luke Cage, or Black Lightning, or female superheroes going all the way back to Wonder Woman (Jeffrey A. Brown, 1999, 2001; DuBose, 2009; Gray II & Kaklamanidou, 2011; Hanley, 2014; Kvaran, 2017; Mulder, 2017; Nama, 2011; Robbins, 2013; L. Robinson, 2004). These superhero stories are co-constitutive of American concerns about race and gender while at the same time projected as global concerns (from an American perspective) (Barbour, 2015; Dittmer, 2011b, 2013; Edwardson, 2003).

My analysis focuses on American superheroes precisely because they are closely connected to American national identity while at the same time unfolding a global meaning and function. Since its very early years, the US has understood itself through a strong dissociation from the rest of the world

and developed assumptions and traditions to foster their exceptional understanding of themselves (McCracken, 2003; Restad, 2015). At the same time and even throughout times of so-called isolationism, the US has seen the entire globe as deeply connected to their own interests, thus making it a major concern for the way policymakers and populations have made sense of security, geopolitical concerns and American identity (Hunt, 2009; W. O. I. Walker, 2009). Consequently, American superheroes as representations and co-producers of national identity quite often have a global mandate to act against threats to both the American nation and global security. What will be addressed in later chapters is this seemingly contradictory nature of superheroes as marketised products and discursive artefacts with both national and international power and appeal.

As much as IR and CSS seem to often shy away from the alleged banality of frivolous entertainment and the presumed worthlessness of the knowledge it produces, there is also a variety of literature that is more interested in representational, philosophical, or moral readings of popular culture. A seduction that is hard to overcome is to see popular culture as a playful thing, not really an artefact of anything but a nice, easy way of symbolically underlining bigger and allegedly more important questions of the world. This might be even more true for superheroes and their original media, the comic book, as this can be easily associated with adolescents and their not entirely serious or naïve engagement with political questions.

Starting with their depiction in comic books, superheroes have been around since the 1930s (see Chapter 2) and since then have been part of the way in which the American nation has negotiated, shaped, constructed, and ultimately seen itself (Dittmer, 2005, 2013; Goodrum, 2016, 2018; Hassler-Forest, 2012; J. K. Johnson, 2012; Prince, 2011). As such, they have been culturally and thus politically contested (L. Burke, 2015; Hajdu, 2008; Kaveney, 2008; Nyberg, 1998; Wright, 2001) and subject to different forms of propaganda and censorship (Brooker, 2000) as an integral part of negotiating these identities through comic books and film (L. Burke, 2015; Davis, 2018; Maslon & Kantor, 2013). Not least because of the increased accessibility of cultural artefacts through online platforms and social media superheroes have become a global phenomenon (Denison & Mizsei-Ward, 2015; Fawaz, 2016; Soares, 2015).

The jump from the comic book as the prime source material of superhero narratives to the silver screen has also been analysed from various perspectives (Gardner, 2012; Gilmore & Stork, 2014; Gordon, Jancovich, & McAllister, 2007) and addressing the specific circumstances of convergence and adaptation (Ioannidou, 2013; D. Johnson, 2012; Yockey, 2017). The cinematic adaptations then also change the way these texts are being received and the way narrative and the economy behind it work (Jeffrey A Brown, 2004; Flanagan, McKenny, & Livingstone, 2016; Zeller-Jacques, 2012). As Dixon and

Graham argue, Marvel and DC were “[c]orrectly judging that the time was right for digitally enhanced escapism, made ever easier with each passing year by increasingly sophisticated imaging technology (computer-generated imagery), both companies dived in to the mainstream theatrical marketplace” (2017, p. 15). In the early 1990s, just at the beginning of the increasing neo-liberalisation of society, Meehan already argued how superhero film “extends beyond the theatre, even beyond our contact with mass media, to penetrate the markets for toys, bedding, trinkets, cups and the other minutiae comprising one's everyday life inside a commoditized, consumerized culture” (1991, p. 49).

Superheroes have been around for much longer than either Marvel or DC comics of course. Scholars are interested in superhero narratives and stories as modern mythology, extending “back to the legend of Gilgamesh” (Coogan, 2013, p. 13). The reading of superheroes as mythological signifiers (Arnaudo, 2013; Arnold, 2011; Coogan, 2006; LoCicero, 2007; Packer, 2010; Serra, 2016) also identifies certain core characteristics of superheroic characters:

A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action – and defended over and over again almost without respite against an endless battery of menaces [...] The normal is valuable and is constantly under attack, which means that almost by definition the superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo. Into this heroic matrix one can insert representatives of any race or creed imaginable, but in order to be functioning superheroes they will need to conform to the ideological rules of the game. The superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to re-invent (Reynolds, 1992, p. 77)

Not exclusive to the US but especially in an American context, Alex Evans argues that myth “is a de-historicizing discourse, designed to elide the contingency of ideological constructs” (2010, p. 17). In this sense, the superhero boom that followed the ‘9/11’ attacks can be explained because “[w]ithin the structured marketplace of myths, the continuity and persistence of particular genres may be seen as keys to identifying the culture's deepest and most persistent concerns” (Slotkin, 1992, p. 8). Another way of putting this in an American context is that superheroes as myths are an integral part of American crisis narratives. Salvatore Mondello treats the *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic books as “historical document” (1976, p. 235). At the same time, Macdonald and Macdonald were wondering about Captain America and “if the concepts he represents is outdated and must die, or if there will be a true metamorphosis, leading to new life in a new form, yet linked to the old” (1976, p. 253). These analyses fall into an important period of American self-reflection and angst, post-Watergate and post-Vietnam, which those authors reflect accordingly.

Other analyses around the way superheroes can co-produce and present themselves as authors of discourses on US foreign policy and security (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003; Lang & Trimble, 1988; Lawrence & Jewett, 2002; McSweeney, 2014; C. A. Scott, 2007) come to the conclusion that:

We do not suggest that the political analyst should turn to the comics for information unavailable elsewhere. On the other hand, one would be hard-pressed to discover anything in the formal literature of political and social science more pertinent to the conditions of the real world than some of the themes and stories in that medium of popular fantasy, the comic book (Skidmore & Skidmore, 1983, p. 91)

Various authors have also pointed out that the history and development of superheroes are closely tied to (national) crises and, crucially, to moments within American history at which national identity is undecided and up for grabs (Biskind, 2018; Bowers, 2012; M. Costello, 2009). As I will show in the next chapter, this starts with World War II and Superman and Captain America pursuing an interventionist agenda before the US enters the war; superheroes renegotiate American identity throughout the Cold War and react heavily and self-consciously to nuclear anxiety (the appearance of Iron Man and Hulk underpin the Cuban Missile Crisis) and geopolitical crises, turning more inwards after the twin crises of Watergate and Vietnam. Ultimately, superhero comic books and films, together with *real* US foreign policy, shared a more concrete similarity: “a constant supply of enemies” (Goodrum, 2016, p. 43). It is then no surprise that superheroes re-appear at a time where the battle for the soul of the American nation is in full swing, starting with ‘9/11’ and the Bush administration, through the Obama presidency and, ultimately, the shift into the presidency of Trump.

As Hassler-Forest argues:

The superhero movie, which has established itself as the dominant genre in 21st-century Hollywood cinema, is one of the clearest articulations of the many contradictions, fantasies, and anxieties that inform this age of neoliberal policies alongside neoconservative values [...] The extraordinary resilience of the genre as a global box-office force during this age of intensified neoliberalism is unusual, and a shift in cultural and ideological concerns as well. (2012, pp. 3-4)

Superheroes are impressive crucial examples of

potent placeholder[s] for the conflicting fantasies and anxieties and desires that typify the age of intensified neoliberalism that was ushered in under the George W. Bush presidency. Traditional distinctions between fact and fiction, news and entertainment, and the real and the virtual have become increasingly tenuous in the post-9/11 years, as the conflation of politics and entertainment grew even more intense than it had become during the Reagan years. (2012, p. 4)

It seems paradoxical that postmodern, neoliberal and post-heroic culture produces and reinvigorates a genre that works as a surrogate for fantasies, utopias and values that seemed to have died out a long time ago. Not least because superhero films are corresponding with the political and social issues of our time, “that film cannot be dismissed simply as a commodity but now becomes crucial to expanding democratic relations, ideologies, and identities” (Henry A. Giroux, 2002, p. 15)

In my analysis, I aim to demonstrate for the films of the DC and Marvel universes what Jason Dittmer did for the comic books of Captain America, namely to “reposition the role of superheroes within popular understandings of geopolitics and international relations from being understood as a ‘reflection’ of pre-existing and seemingly innate American values to being recognised as a discourse through which the world becomes understandable” (2013, p. 2).

### Post-structuralism and inter-textual film analysis

In this section, I will develop my analytical framework based on what is usually referred to as post-structuralist approaches to IR and CSS. First, I will develop the theoretical lens of my analysis. Second, I will define key concepts for my analysis, elaborating why and how superhero texts function as crisis narratives in a post-modern, neo-liberal world. Third, I will briefly explain the role that the ‘War on Terror’ and America as a national construct are playing for my analysis.

### Inter-textuality and epistemology

The question has been so far how knowledge about the *real* world of global politics and matters of security is being produced. Deepening this question, Grayson, Davies and Philpott develop the Popular Culture-World Politics continuum as research agenda, arguing that:

conceptualising them as continuum brings sensitivity to how political phenomena are, at times, diminutively positioned as important products of world politics despite being intertextual, mutually constitutive and even materially entangled through cycles of production, distribution and consumption (2009, p. 158)

This also suggests that knowledge is produced and laid out through cultural artefacts and everyday practices, as well as through the circulation of experiences, images, and narratives through material and virtual spaces, not imitating life and society but crucially shaping it (Bleiker, 2009; Bronfen, 2006). Consequently, popular culture and film cannot be seen as allegorical or metaphorical to world politics while the latter persists as a structural given. As Grayson, Davies and Philpott put it: “We argue that the ongoing and phenomenal growth in the production and circulation of popular culture *makes* world politics what it currently is” Grayson et al. (2009, p. 157). World politics and popular culture are mutually entangled to such a degree that even at their “extreme polar ends, popular culture cannot be divorced from world politics nor world politics from popular culture” (2009, p. 158).

Terrell Carver in his engagement with cinematic ontologies and viewer epistemologies defines three versions of the *knower* in IR, meaning those groups that acquire knowledge from sources that generate knowledge. These three types encompass the academic knower, the state-actor knower and ordinary people as knowers. However, Carver argues that these three life-worlds can be described as one, namely the one of the *moviegoer* since “it represents a common human experience of common materials (i.e. movies as objects in the human life-world) through which politics, and particularly world

politics, is already ‘known’” (2010, p. 422). This approach argues that reducing analysis of world politics to the mimetic, to the text and rhetoric of politicians and other actors would be only superficial. Thus, international politics does consist of images, visual and narrative means that are produced for everyone (for all three life-worlds) to follow, to understand and to relate to. The common denominator being the cinema in which the same concepts and the same framings of these concepts are circulating that give meaning to world politics. As Carver suggests: “Rulers and ruled must therefore share a common language, not just verbally, but in terms of symbolic references through which meaning is necessarily communicated” (2010, p. 427).

Every analysis within IR or CSS then needs to be reflective of its own partiality, that is to say that analysis excludes and omits. While this seems logical for artefacts of popular culture this surely applies maybe even more so to analyses that do not demonstrate such reflexivity. This then also changes epistemological and ontological assumptions (Hansen, 1997; Mustapha, 2013) and connects them to what Michel Foucault describes as power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1977, 1994).

In my analysis I will be looking at 61 superhero films produced by four different studios, assuming that all of them to one degree or another contribute to what many have analysed as post-‘9/11’ surge in superhero films productions (Beaty, 2016; Dittmer, 2012; Hassler-Forest, 2012). The fact that it is a variety of studios producing the films comes from a complicated history of character rights. This also has an influence on whether studios managed to create story arcs connecting a variety of films or should be rather considered as stand-alone productions. The four studios are Warner Brothers who acquired DC and their character rights in 1969. The Superman films of the 1980s and the Batman films of the 1990s were all produced by Warner Brothers. While many Warner Brothers productions are stand-alone films, the Dark Knight trilogy (2005-2012) and the eight films (up to 2020) of the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) have their own connected characters and narratives.

The history of Marvel characters is infinitely more complex. Since 1998 Sony owns the film rights for Spider-Man due to the financial struggles of Marvel at the time. This is the reason why Sony produced and distributed five Spider-Man films between 2002 and 2014 – the Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* trilogy and the two-film reboot *Amazing Spider-Man*. These were very successful at the box office but it was also part of the deal that Sony had to produce a new Spider-Man film at least every five years and nine months (Clark, 2019). In 2015, however, Sony and Disney reached a deal to share the film rights so that Spider-Man could now appear in the main Marvel Cinematic Universe that pivoted around the Avengers and the Infinity War saga. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, meanwhile, had acquired the character and film rights for the X-Men in 1993 (except for Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch who do appear in the MCU) as well as Deadpool and Fantastic Four, all from Marvel. The ten X-Men films produced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox also

have their own continuity separate from the MCU. However, all of Fox's characters are now part of the core Marvel universe again after Disney bought Fox in early 2019. During the 2000s, Marvel had to re-acquire character rights they had lost during a financially more strenuous time at the end of the 1990s. Disney bought Marvel at the end of 2009, making Marvel a subsidiary of Disney. As a result, the plan for economic expansion and therefore for the broad international distribution of Marvel texts and characters increased drastically. Additionally, Marvel decided to organise and structure their films along phases - the first one, running from 2008-2012 (encompassing 5 films) with phase two running from 2013-2015 (6 films) and phase three running from 2016-2019 (11 films), all ultimately badged as the Infinity Saga within the MCU, together with a number of tie-in television series. The connections between the narrative structure of Marvel's phases and modes of production are very much based on Marvel's attempt to create not only a cinematic universe but to furthermore aim for a multimedia project. "In other words, film narratives are crafted to make repeated consumption on DVD (or via digital download) more compulsory. The narrative links constituting the Marvel Cinematic Universe thus encourage careful, repeated, often frame-by-frame viewing" (D. Johnson, 2012, p. 7). In the case of the now legendary post-credits scenes (starting with *Iron Man*), which fans know to expect at the end of every film as a teaser of what is come next, one could argue that they "offer excisable seriality" (D. Johnson, 2012, p. 7). This is what can be described as convergence culture (Ioannidou, 2013; D. Johnson, 2012). Furthermore, the inclusion of comic book managers into the production of Hollywood films (not exclusively restricted to superhero films), changed the modes of production. These changes also incorporate the rather long tradition of Hollywood studios resorting to military and intelligence institutions for production support, as best exemplified by the *Iron Man* films.

These processes also had an impact on the comic books, leading to Marvel's big relaunch in 2012-2015, called *Marvel NOW!*, and DC's relaunch of 2011, called *The New 52*. These reboots were designed to attract audiences that might have not been part of the original core comic book audience but wanted to start reading comic books, not coincidentally connected to the re-invented film genre. It also offered a chance for older comic book audiences, who might have become confused by the different narratives and storylines that Marvel and DC had created over time, to find a new point of origin. Additionally, superheroes also started slowly to make their mark on video games as well as showing increasing presence in the realm of the internet and social media. DC and Marvel also produce a variety of TV shows streaming on Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+. The economic value of superheroes as a brand of global reach is obvious.

The focus of my analysis lies, therefore, on the MCU and the DCEU as two major producers of cinematic texts and beyond, but without losing sight of the productions by Sony and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Both of the latter create a superhero universe with their own logics and dynamics connecting the various films with



each other. My analysis will be a critical, inter-textual film analysis, looking at the specific context of the films productions but also the way those texts then circulate within primarily American society, by far exceeding any renderings of their meaning as mere entertainment.

Following this outline, events and their meaning are constructed through the interplay of various different textual elements, that is to say that meaning is developed through the “[r]elationship between texts’ meaning” (Dittmer, 2010, p. 44). This is a crucial analytical tool as post-structuralists perceive a shift in what they call post-modernity (see the next section), which means that the “very idea of the ‘real world’ has been ‘abolished’ [...] leaving only perspectives, only interpretations of interpretations” (Devetak, 2009b), or textuality (Der Derian & Shapiro, 1989; Derrida, 1997). One might also argue that to “textualize a domain of analysis is to recognize, first of all, that any ‘reality’ is mediated by a mode of representation and, second, that representations are not descriptions of a world of facticity, but are ways of making facticity” (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 13-14). My analysis, however, sees inter-textuality and discourse as inherently tied to notions of *reality*, that is to say engaging not only with the films as texts themselves but analysing them in a system or web of a variety of other texts that become *reality*. As much as *reality* and fiction go hand in hand one cannot divorce popular culture from world politics. Ultimately, they co-produce and co-constitute each other. Jacques Rancière adds that the “aesthetic sovereignty of literature does not therefore amount to the reign of fiction. On the contrary, it is a regime in which the logic of descriptive and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangements used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world” (Rancière, 2015, p. 33).

The meaning of ‘9/11’ then did not unfold itself, nor did it lead inevitably into the ‘War on Terror’, but needed to be carefully moulded, implemented, and eventually normalized (Croft, 2006; Jack Holland, 2013). The analysis of how all of this happened the way it did has to take into account “the politics of language, interpretation, and representation [...] involving the analysis of exceptionalism, debates about ‘liberty’ and ‘security’, and practices of security as a technique of government” (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010, p. 62). Jacques Rancière argues that the “real must be fictionalized in order to be thought” (2015, p. 34) especially since the aesthetic revolution “rearranges the rules of the game by making two things interdependent: the blurring of the borders between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions *and* the new mode of rationality that characterizes the science of history” (2015, p. 32). As Hayden White argues, “written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced” (1988, p. 1194). In my inter-textual film analysis, I will carve out how the superhero genre creates those fictions and fantasies that permeate the political everyday.

## Conceptual framework

In this section, I will contextualise my analysis by briefly outlining the key concepts on which my empirical chapters are based. This will encompass post-modernity, neo-liberalism, and crisis and how those concepts relate to my analysis within the broader context of IR and CSS.

### Post-modernity and popular culture

It is one of the core arguments of my analysis that, while popular culture and arts have always been part of societal and political experience, post-modernity produces a specific form of popular culture and vice versa. This is to say that there are different perspectives about the way politics and culture interact and how popular culture serves as an artefact. The Frankfurt School in particular points out how popular culture in juxtaposition with high culture or art functions as mass culture, that is to say as a means of control and power of elite actors over *the people*. Resistance, change, or discourse are secondary concerns while potentially liberating aspects deriving from the enlightenment about individual freedom or social progress are being replaced by instruments of power: “In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly. What is not mentioned is that the basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 129). Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of popular culture as *Kulturindustrie* underline the mechanical, technical and rationalised way in which mass culture is being used by elites, rather than complex artefacts, to manipulate and subjugate. For the Frankfurt School, in capitalism, mass culture becomes the direct continuation of industrialised labour, an extension of exploitation:

Film and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products (2002, p. 129)

But their reading, while understandable from the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer writing these lines in 1944, remains flawed and equally mimetic and deterministic as strands of so-called traditional IR that reject any engagement with culture in the first place. As Possamai argues: “The feature of postmodernism in the arts is that there can no longer be any boundary between art and everyday life; that there should no longer be a hierarchy between high and popular culture. The assumption that art is only repetition and that nothing new can be invented is also central” (2007, p. 18). Understanding the artefact of my analysis as popular culture and not mass culture makes the former an artefact in the first place (Jenkins, 2007) and opens up the space to address the immense inter-textual complexities that make popular culture more than merely representational and reducible to its distribution. Popular culture becomes the realm of constant political contestation where notions of power and dominance unfold in an ideological struggle for the control of society, a circumstance very well understood by

Walter Benjamin (W. Benjamin, 2008). What I argue is that “all texts are ultimately political. That is, they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be” (Storey, 2006, p. 3). This form of analysis then understands “popular culture as an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised” (Grayson et al., 2009, pp. 155-156).

My analysis takes popular culture and post-modernity as having a symbiotic relationship – they cannot be divorced from each other, however hard the attempts to disaggregate them. In this sense, political events and phenomena, textuality, visuality, and virtuality concur in our world (Der Derian, 2000; Virilio, 1989). Locating contemporary society and politics in postmodernity is important because it “describes the state of mind of one or several generations that have had to painfully disassociate themselves from the great truths of the previous epoch, without having found for themselves a new unitary system of reference” (Dietrich & Sützl, 2006, p. 283). To put it in other words: “What is new in all of this is that the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 14). This applies to any entity, material or ideational, that shapes and influences identities such as the state, religion, or family. The postmodern erosion of these institutions creates an existential void for a “surrogate” for the “fewer and fewer communities or institutions in which [it is possible] to find identity or values” (Strinati, 2006, p. 6). There is then a strong connection, even more so in an increasingly postmodern and virtual age, between popular culture and people’s everyday lived experience. Francois Debrix describes the link between post-modernity and popular culture as follows:

Contemporary popular culture is a tabloid or trash culture. It is so in the United States and, by way of what is taken to be globalization, in the rest of the world too. Labelling a culture tabloid or trash is not a pejorative dismissal. It is not a rejection of so-called 'everyday lowbrow or middlebrow culture' and its modes of expression, representation, and entertainment on behalf of an allegedly higher, elite, refined or bourgeois culture [...] [T]he tabloid status of today's popular cultural productions and consumptions is a descriptive and expository notion that refers to a certain moment or mood [...] referred to as the postmodern condition (2008)

In a similar fashion, Kooijman argues that what he describes as fake-ness of popular culture “is not an act of dismissal but rather the recognition of one of its most attractive and seductive characteristics” (Kooijman, 2011, p. 23). As Tim Edensor argues, “national identity is grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge” (2002, p. 17). Especially at a time of the perceived loss of existential and essential institutions and values the everyday and popular culture become a crucial site that aims to replace, recreate and reinvigorate these points of orientation that were torn down by the loss of modernity and modern grand narratives.

This loss of orientation has been leading to the point of social disintegration of individuals from traditional social institutions. Whether it appears as something desirable or not, it is these voids, these cleavages within postmodern identities and ideologies, the complexities of the everyday and the lack of clarity within individual experiences that are amalgamated by media and popular culture. Lyotard might be right in his critique that linking the collapse of grand narratives to contemporary issues of modernity seems “haunted by the paradisiac representation of a lost ‘organic’ society” (1997, p. 15). Maybe such an organic society never existed in the first place, but what the postmodern era does is to crucially blur the distinction between reality and fiction: “It is no longer even a question of the media distorting reality, since this implies there is a reality, outside the surface simulations of the media” (Strinati, 2006, p. 206).

Jean Baudrillard assumed that by the process of simulating reality, undertaken by mass media, the difference between the *real* and its representation collapses and becomes hyperreality (1994). As he diagnosed in 1983: “When the real is no longer that it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” (1983, p. 12). Surely his analysis gains even more validity and complexity in the digital age. One might even speak of an obsession with origins and origin stories, while there is the post-modern realisation that origins offer “not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. [...] What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (Foucault, 2001, p. 343). At the same time it becomes clear that the critique that we live in a *post-truth* era are not only problematic (Crilley, 2018; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2018) but potentially dangerous as it rejects the power of narrative and aesthetics as well as discourse and foregrounds a foundational *reality* that we just needed to (re-)discover. It fetishises the fiction of *reality* as something desirable and achievable, leaving, as Baudrillard calls it above, nostalgia. There might have always been this interpretational, imperfect, vague aspect of reality but in Baudrillard’s concept, the barriers between the fictional, the simulation and the real have collapsed and, as a consequence, negotiability and contestability of ideologies and identities become exaggerated. As Shapiro argues, “first of all, that any ‘reality’ is mediated by a mode of representation and, second, that representations are not descriptions of a world of facticity, but are ways of making facticity” (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 13-14).

### Neo-liberalism, violence, and security

Further to the section on post-modernity and popular culture above, this section develops some more of the key concepts that will inform my empirical chapters. Neo-liberalism and its connections to post-modernity (maybe even as a post-modern phenomenon) plays a crucial role in order to understand how superhero films and characters could become so omnipresent in contemporary society.

Drawing on Foucault, I understand neo-liberalism as an expression of biopower (1978, 2004). As those analysing biopolitics as such and neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) specifically argue, the modern sovereign state is very much concerned with the way that (neo-liberal) subjects circulate within economic and political systems (Alphin & Debrix, 2020). Moving beyond the application of seeing neo-liberalism as, at least primarily, an economic system (Mudge, 2008) I argue that neo-liberalism operates as cultural field (Henry A Giroux, 2004) within a post-modern world and infiltrates a variety of institutions, that is to say not only those governed by the state but maybe even more so in the everyday and, thus, becomes a form of self-government. Popular culture becomes one of those institutions through which power is circulating, not in a one-way direction but as a matter of contestation and negotiation between a variety of actors. Neo-liberalism has thus begun to operate “within almost every aspect of our individual and social lives” in which “individuals are compelled to assume market-based values in *all* their judgements and practices in order to amass sufficient quantities of ‘human capital’ and thereby become ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). In this sense, popular culture and its agents might return “human agency to a world which seems less and less the product of human action” (Denning, 1987, p. 14). This has crucial implications for how to understand security and violence in the ‘War on Terror’. Participating in specific practices, behaviours, and rituals becomes an inherent part of how the state tries to manage populations and build consent for political agendas (Foucault, 2007), but also how subjects position themselves and perceive others. This means that political issues are individualized rather than seen as systemic issues, which produces groups of those who participate (in the market, consumption, cultural activities, in reproduction, etc.) and those who don’t while “it seems ‘natural’ that they should deal with the consequences of their failure to compete” (Alphin, 2020, p. 15). Rather than bigger social, political, or economic issues being solved, it becomes an existential struggle to participate in political and social regimes, not least in the task for collective security (Springer, 2016). Caught between vague notions of freedom, autonomy, and responsibility (Harvey, 2005) and bigger-than-life issues such as terrorism, climate change, and economic downturn, neo-liberal subjects fight an essentially violent and futile struggle in their mundane everyday. It is no surprise, then, that the superhero genre appears at a time where life, violence, and survival are tied to a neo-liberal zeitgeist. Narratives and images of endless apocalyptic battles, these “end-of-the-world scenarios reveal how one of the pervasive elements of neo-liberalism is the false notion that we have indeed reached the end of history” (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 208). Both popular culture and neo-liberal anxiety, then, are part of basically everybody’s life world. Popular culture can provide “a view of vulnerabilities already present in the United States and distorts them into a dystopian landscape, but one that still feels quite familiar in neoliberal times” (Armstrong, 2019, p. 383). In this sense, superhero films work in a variety of ways by managing to invade the life worlds of global audiences. They deliver

not only fantasies of being saved from a dangerous world by a saviour figure but provide comprehensive and relatable notions of individual and group heroism.

In a Foucauldian understanding, contemporary security and surveillance regimes are based on what he describes as the panopticon, that is disciplining and ordering the means by which the many are watching the few, for example through CCTV cameras (Foucault, 1991). As Foucault argues, by “definition, discipline regulates everything. Discipline allows nothing to escape. Not only does it not allow things to run their course, its principle is that things, the smallest things, must not be abandoned to themselves” (Foucault, 2007, p. 45). But as various authors have addressed, especially in the past decades of the neo-liberal era, it is time to think of surveillance not as panoptic (the few watching the many) but as synoptic (the many watching the few) (Lyon, 2006, 2011). Thomas Mathiesen relates this development directly to film, saying that “panopticism and synopticism have *developed in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other*” (1997, p. 223). Through film then, audiences learn how to watch but also how to be watched, internalising both moves. Security and surveillance in the post-modern era then become increasingly tied to spectacle, defined by Guy Debord as “not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (2018, p. 2). Lisle reacts to Debord by asserting that since “we are saturated with media images, it is impossible to identify a genuine event—something set apart from our banal everyday lives. In effect, the spectacle and the everyday are identical” (2004, p. 14). As Bauman argues: “Spectacles take the place of surveillance without losing any of the disciplining power of their predecessor” achieving the obedience to standards “through enticement and seduction rather than by coercion - and it appears in the disguise of the exercise of free will, rather than revealing itself as an external force” (Bauman, 2000, p. 86). The result is that rather than reflecting on reasons for violence and terrorism, in a spectacular society everyone becomes surveilling (to say something if you see something) while everybody else becomes a potential suspect (of being a terrorist or, most recently, of carrying a deadly disease).

Even discourses such as security or life itself become critical because systemic contemplations, analyses, and diagnoses are rendered impossible in a neo-liberal society. This might also be the reason why even “a momentous event like 9/11 does not provoke much thinking about violence. Our age may well be called ‘The Age of Violence’ because representations of real or imagined violence (sometimes blurred and fused together) are inescapable” (Bernstein, 2013). What remains unexamined are the deeper systemic reasons for violent occurrences. In his provocative, essay Jean Baudrillard doubts that an event like the Gulf War (or later ‘9/11’) had even taken place. (Baudrillard, 1995). This is not to say that there were no material expressions, no killings etc, but what he argues here is that the beginning, the course and the ending of the war had already been decided and scripted before it had even started. In a hyper-mediatised age this constantly blurs the line between *reality* and fiction.

This is not to say that expressions of violence, the loss of life and the maiming of bodies do not have any material dimension to them. All around the world different regimes oscillating between life and death create specific, ever-changing everyday realities for millions of people that would be unthinkable elsewhere. Violence, life, and subjectivity are nonetheless discursively produced. This puts a hierarchy of loss and death in place, described by Judith Butler as a hierarchy of grievability of life (Butler, 2010). The '9/11' terror attacks, rather than merely leading to the loss of lives, furthermore signified a loss of "First Worldism" that "is the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world itself as a national entitlement" (Butler, 2006, p. 39). What '9/11' demonstrated then is that in societies "where the media do not spectacularize the event, the killing of thousands of people in a very short period of time might provoke fewer psychic and political effects than the assassination of a single individual in another country, culture, or nation-state with highly developed media resources" (Borradori, 2003, pp. 107-108). This is to say that violence and crisis are fundamental and essential to security discourses in the neo-liberal, post-modern, and post-'9/11' age but, furthermore, were always ingrained in the American nation itself.

#### America and crisis

American exceptionalism as well as its alleged challenger, international terrorism, are already very much based on fantasy, since, as Trevor McCrisken argues "Americans think of themselves as exceptional, then, not necessarily in what they are but in what they could be. For this reason the sense of exceptionalism can never die, no matter how unexceptional the nation may appear in reality" (McCrisken, 2003, p. 10). Equally, Jean Baudrillard sees America as hyperreal "because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too" (2010, p. 28). This statement also has to be seen against the backdrop of the relatively young history of the American nation which, at the same time, has to be understood as one of physical encounter, if not to say force: "Examples of this can be witnessed in later historical discourses that talk about the *land* of freedom, the experience of the *frontier*, and the importance of *geopolitics* for security. In each instance, the spatial is given priority over the temporal and the historical" (D. Campbell, 1998, p. 97). The 'War on Terror' and post-'9/11' security discourses were then very much shaped by a specific definition of terrorism that "determines a sequence - the entire current sequence is from now on considered as 'the war against terrorism'. We are warned that it will be a long war, an entire epoch" (Badiou, 2003, p. 143).

As controversial as the assumption of hyperreality and the cultural construction of *reality* might be, '9/11' seems like a good place to start. When people pointed out that they could not believe what they saw in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 because it was *like in a film* (Aslan, 2010; Croft, 2006) then it is because we have already seen it before, envisioned it to the extent that the actual

event might actually disappoint. This indicates that the event was new but not original. On the contrary, the events seemed so familiar because they seemed like something that has happened over and over again on TV screens, in cinemas, computer games or novels. Essentially, the images were already set up and integrated within the fabric of the everyday. This could also be seen in the immediate aftermath, George W. Bush giving a bullhorn speech to New York rescue workers and firemen on September 14, 2001, invoking Bill Pullman's presidential speech in *Independence Day* (1996) (Bush, 2001c).

This also means that '9/11' produced a crisis that seemed unprecedented. This event also led to a change in security policies and discourses and violent interventions abroad. However, as I will show throughout the thesis, crisis as much as violent encounter and force are essential cornerstones of the American project. This quite often limits the alternatives and options of American policymakers and the public in thinking about solutions for approaching crises. From '9/11' to the 'War on Terror' as well as the Trump presidency and Covid-19, all of these events produced and still produce a sense of crisis in America that is always constructed as existential, while crisis was already at the heart of the origin of the American nation (Croft, 2006). These consecutive crises are more often than not framed and experienced as forms of internal or external violence. Superheroes offer the spaces that can provide at least preliminary solutions to those crises. They have a mitigating function not only for comic book and film fans but are a comprehensive artefact even for people who have not watched a single film or read a single comic book. The fact that the superhero genre starts to boom cinematically (and then itself influencing comic books, video games, merchandise, etc.) makes sense at a time during which everyday activities such as riding a bus or accessing a governmental building become perceived as existentially threatening while superhero texts offer no shortage of endless enemies that want to harm America and the world. The violence cinematic superhero texts portray, then, is dehistoricised in the sense that they are both always tying political struggles back to the time of their creation while at the same time mythologising and thus decontextualising their perpetual fight against evil. This will shine through my analysis of superheroes and superhero films in the following chapters, underlining their potential as important political artefacts. Furthermore, what is crucial is that the narratives I will look at in my analysis that became the established and to some extent common sense explanations and political guidelines were never self-evident and obvious but constitute "a site demanding ongoing excavation, a site that marks *before* and *after* 'everything' changed" (Birkenstein, Froula, & Randell, 2010, p. 2). That is to say that the way we now think about the development in American security and foreign policy since '9/11' and this particular event itself depends a lot on permanent cultural, political, and societal negotiation.



## Roadmap of the thesis

The thesis is structured into six main chapters, following a more or less chronological order. The reason for this lies in the overarching argument that superheroes are (co-)producers of American security and foreign policy as well as crisis discourses. Thus the main chapters will begin with a brief overview of the origin of (American) superheroes and the role they played up until 2001. Chapters 3 to 6 are structured along presidential terms to highlight how the cinematic texts and American politics changed and evolved together, underlining the (co-)constitutive nature of both. Another aspect is that US Presidents (similar to superheroic figures) fulfil a central role in the way current US politics is being seen and interpreted. They have a commanding role in shaping security and foreign policy and are traditionally connected to the periods they have been acting in, for example, FDR to World War II, Kennedy and Johnson to civil rights discourses and Vietnam, etc. At the same time, they do not act and determine discourses alone but are only one, if powerful, factor. Structuring the thesis in line with presidential terms aims to highlight this intertextual relationship.

Chapter 2 will consider how and why superheroes appeared in an American context. The origin of superhero characters within culture and their predecessors are embedded in myths and narratives of the American nation itself, quite often referred to as American Monomyth. From the creation of superheroes such as Superman in 1938 or Captain America in 1941, through the decades after World War II they had to reinvent themselves periodically, which also meant that superheroic narratives had to be updated, altered, and 'retconned'. The search for a new purpose at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is eventually successful, made possible through '9/11'.

Chapter 3 is the first presidency chapter and will look at the two terms of George W. Bush (2001-2009) and how '9/11' was immediately followed by what I call the 'hero turn'. I will look at the traumatic origin stories within the superhero films and how they parallel the traumatic story of America at the beginning of the 'War on Terror' as well as how they established the new security regime of counter-terrorism. The *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-2007), *Batman Begins* (2005), and *Superman Returns* (2006) mediate between the crisis of '9/11' and the attempt to maintain a form of continuity in the national narrative. While the 'War on Terror' is established as an infinite war during the Bush administration there might also be spaces for resistance to Bush's polarising policies, expressed in *Iron Man* (2008) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). What comes across more and more is the desire to have a new path in the 'War on Terror' transitioning to Obama's presidency based on notions of hope and change.

Chapter 4 engages with the first term of Obama (2009-2013) and the way, by then, a fully formed and commercially highly successful genre revived the avalanche of origin stories that were navigating between new forms of masculinity and leadership. The attempt to rehistoricise the violence

superheroic characters are conducting through the appearance of benevolent and self-conscious superheroes in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *Thor* (2011). The failure of the Obama administration to move away from the 'War on Terror' game and its implications, however, establish specific security practices further and begin to open a new polarising crisis, suggested in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The end of MCU's Phase 1 (2008-2012) culminates in the gargantuan battle for New York in *The Avengers*<sup>1</sup> (2012), bringing together a powerful superhero team to fight an alien army. Films of this period begin to paradoxically avoid and reinforce themes reminiscent of '9/11' while invoking the spirit of superheroes not so much as individuals rather than as teams.

Chapter 5 analyses how Obama in his second term (2013-2017) is confronted with counter-narratives to his presidency, best epitomised in *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). While the critique remains broadly superficial, what is more visible are themes of a deep suspicion towards the state and the return of strong individualism which are spear-heading a resorting back to the myth of vigilantism and the Frontier experience as nostalgic motives in *Man of Steel* (2013) (as the first film of the DCEU), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). By then, the global success of superhero films means that American security discourses are also circulating more and more on a global scale. Ultimately, the nation as well as the superheroes are left polarised, the US presidential election campaign of 2016 dragging it into an existential battle of values. The crucial question about who is allowed to exercise violence drives the conflict between the superheroes in *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), the latter also completing MCU's Phase 2 (2013-2016).

Chapter 6 argues that the first term of the Trump presidency (2017-2021) catapults America into a polarising crisis of permanent alarmism and apocalyptic discourses that ultimately embed the existential struggle that had started under Bush. *Justice League* (2017) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) feature existential threats not only to America but to the whole universe. In a variety of films, such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) one might identify the development of liberal<sup>2</sup> counter-narratives or spaces of critique to Trump's aggressive rhetoric and presidency. Yet, again, these counter-narratives remain superficial. Rather, the end of MCU's Phase 3 with *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2019) displays the return to the conventional use of force against evil and the sanitisation of the American

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<sup>1</sup> Also known in the UK as *Avengers Assemble* so as not to be confused with the popular British espionage television series *The Avengers* (1961-1969)

<sup>2</sup> In the course of my thesis I will refer to political labels such as conservative, liberal, left-wing, right-wing, feminist etc. I am not using these labels as analytical concepts but to exemplify how political discourses in the US are divided and classified. For example, when I refer to someone as "conservative commentator" then this is in no way a political assessment but usually refers to how they would broadly identify themselves.

superhero with global appeal. This establishes a specific form of American leadership and demonstrates the role superheroes play in the Trumpian culture war.

I will synthesise my analyses from my empirical chapters in the conclusion. I will conclude that superheroes as carriers of discourses on crisis, violence, and security have established themselves as an everyday lens to look at mundane and highly complex issues. They co-constitute post-'9/11' security discourses throughout the 'War on Terror' and in doing so produce important themes overarching US foreign policy. As long as we do not transcend these discourses and issues, the superheroic will remain in the fabric of our world.

And as with all good superhero films, you might want to sit through the end credits for the post-credits scene...

## Chapter 2 – Superheroes Through Time

### Introduction

This chapter serves to introduce superheroes as characters with a specific function within American culture and beyond. Superheroes did not suddenly appear after '9/11' but had been integral to American cultural production since the end of the 1930s, operating as crucial authors of struggles within national identity and security discourses. The first section engages with the development of the American Monomyth that begins with the founding of the United States in 1776 that functions as basis for the later establishment of American superheroes. Second, I will talk about how superheroes emerge at the brink of World War II in the late 1930s, positioning themselves against isolationist tendencies in America and going to war with Hitler before the US itself did. This indicates how superheroes such as Superman and Captain America shaped the national discourse from their inception, at a time when American identity and policy are undecided and uncertain. Third, the Cold War revealed itself to be an era full of consecutive crises and covered in anxious political and cultural themes to which superheroes contribute. Oriented towards World War II there is the increased attempt to position US foreign policy against the backdrop of this 'good war' and to hold on to a historical continuity of success and triumph which remains very difficult to achieve. Superheroes of this period remain individualistic, even though superhero teams like Fantastic Four, Justice League, and The Avengers first appear. Fourth, I will look at how America was faced with yet another identity crisis at the end of the millennium as it was left without a major antagonist after the ending of the Cold War. In this context, the *X-Men* (2000) led superheroes into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when '9/11' posed a new challenge to American existence.

### The American Monomyth and the birth of the American nation

This section engages with the founding of the American nation and how themes of superheroism and greatness were woven into its national identity from the beginning. As much as superheroes are inherently tied to their origin story and retain their identity from it, *America*<sup>3</sup> is inherently tied to theirs, unfolding a special relationship to their mythical past. This is not to say that other nations do not have similar mythical connections to their real or imagined pasts. On the contrary, the construction of national narratives through basing them on histories and memory applies to the concept of modern nation-making itself (Anderson, 2006). But America has a history that is not only a lot shorter than many other nations, but this relatively short history contributes to making it more knowable and at least for many Americans more relatable.

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<sup>3</sup> The country founded on July 4, 1776 replaced the previous name "United Colonies of America" with the henceforth known "United States of America". The term "America" that is used by most US citizens as well as citizens from all over the world is a signifier, bringing with it a specific meaning and function that supersedes the formal "United States" and gives it a greater sense of national identity.

Joseph Campbell's classic discussion on the origin of the hero and the hero's journey is paradigmatic for how heroism and its super-embodiments can be read, namely as Monomyth. He connects the concepts of heroism to a broader mythological context, namely the monomyth: "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (J. Campbell, 2004, p. 10). He develops a framework that describes the journey of the hero as one where he or she is ripped out of the known, paradisiac society and put on a journey that features the confrontation with the abyss, a decisive crisis and eventually a decisive victory to return to the known and familiar society. While Campbell's work has been discussed critically the themes he develops are recurring features such as the hero's journey but also the interplay between religious and non-religious elements within popular culture, especially in a Western context (Evans, 2010; Somigli, 1998; Vogler, 2007). In this sense, Campbell's Monomyth should not be seen as an essentialist way of looking at hero narratives but provides one lens that gives attention to certain myths and narratives that work as a staple for national identity and world politics. Roland Barthes explores this connection between *reality* and myth by expressing "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (1993, p. 11). Barthes rejects the conflation of nature and history in – as a consequence – objective knowledge about past worlds and sees history more as a product of specific mythologies that he analyses; in this sense myth works as a "language" (1993, p. 11).

Against the backdrop of the originally paradisiac society, nostalgia and myth become part of hero and superhero stories as the "hero's journey is an inherently positive view of the world. It intimates an Eden where life was perfect until recently, where these new evils which threaten the social order are surmountable, and where the individual's lot in life ever improves" (Koh, 2009, p. 741). These specific mythological narratives (such as the journey as a signifier for development and progress) and figures (such as the hero as carrier for political discourses) seem a transcending feature in US history, developed further by Jewett and Lawrence into a distinctively *American Monomyth*:

Its impress may be seen in thousands of popular-culture artefacts: *A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive tasks: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity* (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977 xx)

Similar to Campbell's original work, these definitions can work as a guiding tool through analyses of American society but they are also very much subject to change. They are dependent on temporal and spatial contexts; however, some are more hegemonic (nationally and internationally) than others. Against this backdrop, Ryan argues: "There are multiple representations of the past in most modern

societies. Professional history, though important, does not necessarily have a widespread impact except through the earlier years of education; and this is a simple narrative based around the orthodox interpretation” (2000, p. 9).

In an American context, the founding of the Republic already indicates the crucial presence of a variety of mythologised stories. For example, still today in political or everyday discourses, people refer to the Declaration of Independence of 1776 or the Founding Fathers in broadly uncritical ways and assume the circumstances back then directly relate to contemporary times. Different myths are operating then outside of their historical context as transcending leitmotifs. The Declaration of Independence or the role of the Founding Fathers are still being invoked with their fundamental significance not contested. The only contestation is between more liberal or conservative interpretations of these events and figures, but what is treated more or less as common sense resembles a predominantly positive view of the founding. There is a specific heroic ethos surrounding the founding of the nation and an ex-post (and still ongoing) interpretation of its origins coming from a mixture of religious and enlightenment themes that ultimately mythologise American history from its beginnings. Green argues that “[s]ince its creation in the early nineteenth century, the central function of this narrative has been to *simplify* the Founding into an uncomplicated form that meets with the hopes and aspirations of many Americans. This is the chief explanation for the resilience of the myth: its simplicity” (2017, p. 242). One might argue, then, that duality is already integral to the formation of American national identity (Lieven, 2012) which is then further invoked in images of (super)heroism which always requires an Other to challenge. At the same time, and because of its clarity and simplicity, the American origin story delivers a nostalgic orientation point until today.

Foundational tropes like the City Upon a Hill or Beacon of Freedom are carefully preserved and reinvoked by successive generations of politicians, right across the political spectrum, as well as in American culture. The revolutionary moment of American independence allowed for an early establishment of ‘America’ as a creed, based on specific values and glancing over contradictions or paradoxical inconsistencies (Lipset, 1996). These discursive features are buttressed by the myths surrounding Manifest Destiny which equipped the American nation with a self-perceived unique purpose, namely “expansion, prearranged by Heaven, over an area not clearly defined” (Merk, 1995, p. 24) and the Frontier which established violence and force as determining features of its national experience (Slotkin, 1973). The role violence plays (as well as many other facets within American mythology) was not allowed to resemble the violence executed by the colonial powers of Europe whom they just emancipated themselves from. In order to preserve a form of narrative coherence, the use of violence and force needed to be carefully justified, legitimised, and normalised; this lesson functions as a transcending theme in American history. Tom Engelhardt sees America’s origins rooted as a *War Story*

of 250 years of violence against the native peoples that was constructed as “essentially defensive in nature” (1995, p. 5). Engelhardt makes sense of it by arguing that the “American war story was especially effective as a builder of national consciousness because it seemed so natural, so innocent, so nearly childlike and was so little contradicted by the realities of invasion or defeat” (1995). The American Revolutionary War from 1775-1783 helped develop a specific version of the revolutionary moment on the one hand and the use of violence on the other (J. P. Greene, 1995). That is to say that from this moment it became clear to Americans what revolution had to look like, while other forms of social or political revolution could a priori be disqualified as illegitimate (both for domestic revolutionary movements as well as those abroad). The westward expansion and the Frontier experience were consequently buttressed by the concept of Manifest Destiny. That is to say that America “was unique and marked by God for a special destiny” (A. S. Greenberg, 2012, p. 5). While this form of national mythologisation is not exclusively American, Stephanson argues that next to the utopian experiment of the Soviet Union there is no nation that “envisaged a transcending ‘end’ of history through a fundamental change of the world in accordance with its own self-image” (Stephanson, 1995 xii). As a consequence, the Frontier experience established was built on innocence, virtue, and freedom to cover up the bloody and violent nature of westward expansion (Dower, 2010). As Munslow argues, “the ultimate function of this frontier-inspired myth history remains ideological, in this case to create an ahistorical uniqueness of America founded on the determining power of the frontier” (1996, p. 18).

It becomes a necessity of American national identity for historical events to be rebranded and reinterpreted to be distinguishable from any other country, especially the Europeans. If the Europeans were colonial and oppressive then by definition America was the opposite. This, of course, erases violent events such as slavery or the Indian Wars to a large extent and feeds them into a sanitised narrative. This creates a nation that claims to have inherently benign motives and intentions (McCracken, 2003). Additionally the American nation built a history pervaded by crisis and conflict, quite often on an existential level; one might think of the conflicts to rid the European powers of any influence, geopolitical conflicts with Mexico and Spain, the bloody Western expansion no matter the cost for the native population, slavery, the Civil War, and, ultimately World War I that fed into a reinvigorated understanding that the fate and future of the United States could only be defended and secured by force and, ultimately, that obstacles in the way of civilisational progress were meant more as a test of faith rather than failure and were thus further proof that Americans were indeed the ‘chosen people’. The interplay between existential crisis and force ultimately makes violence redemptive and renders the American nation innocent. A lot of cultural and political effort goes into reshaping and remodelling this history to fit the current moment, making American history highly ambivalent and fragile (Bhabha, 1990; Slotkin, 1973). The Frontier experience then becomes “the total American

experience" (Slotkin, 1973, p. 19) that works outside of any historical context (R. T. Hughes, 2004). Eventually the mentioned traditions, values and beliefs that inform American mythology are presented as eternal features that if not in practice then by fate and in hindsight had always been part of a bigger American project. As David Ryan puts it: "The nearly deified traditions of US diplomacy over time serve the same function as cultural myths. [...] Like ideology, myths integrate the national experience and serve as vehicles to overcome internal contradictions" (2000, p. 9).

Starting with the focus on individual members of the Founding Fathers, there is an early focus on the role of individual strength and sacrifice. Notions of individual heroisms early on lead to the "[d]eification of George Washington" (Green, 2017, p. 202) and other popular figures within US history. The connection between divinity and superheroism is thus already outlined, as Lawrence and Jewett argue:

The US president, standing so often at center stage during historic crises, has been woven into the fabric of national mythology. Legend-making about presidents emerged as soon as the nation had presidents to ponder. However, the development of fantasies about the president as a violent superhero – a man who can bare-handedly strangle the nation's enemies – occurred only at the end of the twentieth century (2002, p. 126).

The connection of the contemporary version of violent superheroes (promoted by popular culture) to figures such as the President only appear in the last few decades (one might think of Reagan's association with the Rambo film character in attempts to re-write the history or at least the meaning of the Vietnam War) (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002; Slotkin, 1992). Superheroism was already laid out in the way national history and crisis were conceptualised from the beginning. Themes of crisis quite often connected to existential questions from both a religious and enlightened side, which were already part of the American nation (Robert N Bellah, 2005; Croft, 2006). As Le Beau argues, "if the collective memories that those commemorations elicit seem contrived, or if at other times moments of self-doubt about, or criticism of those collective memories appear to evoke an excessively emotional outpouring, it is because the stakes are so high in the United States" (1996, p. 51).

Against this backdrop, Lawrence and Jewett argue that "Washington's character as selfless savior of the country and Lincoln's behavior as the man who deliberately circumvented laws to serve a higher purpose" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 132) are features that appear in every expression of the American Monomyth. This concept of an American form of heroism that is expressed, negotiated and promoted fits neatly with the ultimate mythological concept that seems to vertically transcend American history, society, and foreign policy, namely exceptionalism. Carried by (popular) culture from the early beginnings of the new nation exceptionalism can be understood as "the idea that the United States had unique qualities as a society and a special destiny as a nation" (Hodgson, 2009, p. 174).



Individual hero stories have thereby helped to “articulate a particularly geopolitical vision and sense of self, which is often shorthand as American exceptionalism” (Dittmer, 2011a, p. 114). One might think of esteemed characters such as Paul Revere’s midnight ride, George Washington’s crossing of the Delaware, Custer’s last stand or Abraham Lincoln’s ‘freeing’ of slaves and eventually losing/giving his own life. However, these ties between (super)heroism and exceptionalism are not (even in its exaggerated, heightened form) about whether the US *really* is a fixed, unique entity, a superior country with a special role to play in world history. Rather exceptionalism should be seen as a project or journey that was set out from its very beginning as a perpetual pathway with no final destination (McCracken, 2003). It requires a form of unattainability, a longing for some paradisiac state of society that has to remain an impossibility while at the same time being under permanent attack by outside forces. This creates an environment in which America is entitled to use violence while claiming it never does so out of aggression but only to defend the nation and its values.

Exceptional beliefs are then informed by a variety of other values and beliefs such as liberty, freedom, individualism, democracy, human rights, constitutionalism, etc, all of which are also informed in the US by this sense of exceptionalism. The specific definitions of these concepts do not seem to be of high importance; what is American or un-American becomes rather a question of political opinion than factual discussion. It is the vagueness of these concepts that is necessary to sustain a national identity that is in permanent flux and movement, functioning as floating signifiers for Americans themselves but also to serve as an example for the rest of the world. Crucially, they are part of metaphorical or embodied versions of the American Monomyth. American heroes need to subscribe to at least some of these values in order to remain recognisably American but also desirable in their construction of national identity. What will be argued regarding the importance of superheroes for the construction of security and foreign policy is that the “discourse of American exceptionalism is not only produced through the arguments of political and academic elites; it is also co-constituted through popular culture” (Dittmer, 2013, p. 11).

The strong focus on individuals in the founding of the nation has become a transcendental element of American history. The Frontier experience and the overlaying ideological tropes of Manifest Destiny produced its very own representations and cultural disseminations including the emergence of heroic figures that are connected to the frontier. This also produces a culture in which mythologised characters are drawn out of the frontier, such as Jedediah Smith, the Donner-Reed Party, Davy Crockett, or cowboy characters such as Jesse James or Billy the Kid. In her analysis of these quite lonely, individualistic characters, Jones points out that “[w]hatever their genesis, most mythic beings change, almost organically as their stories are told and retold. This is, however, less true for the cowboy than for other

mythic heroes" (1994, p. 193). She analyses a specific set of beliefs and values that make it difficult for the cowboy hero to develop but to remain holding up the status quo:

He remains a defender of a lady's reputation; a believer in man-to-man resolution of conflict, able to kill when necessary, though not indiscriminately; a faithful adherent to a strong moral code if not a particular religious denomination; a respecter of horses and of justice; usually a Southerner, with a Southerner's gentility and sense of decorum; a man confident of his skill but not boastful (M. E. Jones, 1994, p. 193)

Figures like the cowboy (and his dark mirror image, the bandit) were crucial to support the vision of Manifest Destiny. As Levy points out: "The metaphorical richness of the frontier myth and the manifold identities of the western hero found expression in every cultural sphere" (2012, p. 25). At the same time, there was a fierce rejection of colonial violence and imperial rule or other characteristics that were perceived as showing too much similarity with the politics and actions of the European powers America had left behind at the other side of the Atlantic. This did not contradict the mission of expansion towards the West; indeed, the use of military or violent means underscored by specific values has been "considered effective and justified. Expansion has also been premised on the conviction that America and Americans are not tainted with evil or self-serving motives. Americans, the ideology says, are exceptions to the moral infirmities that plague the rest of humankind, because our ideals are pure" (Nugent, 2009 xvi).

The benign use of force against the backdrop of a vague concept of exceptionalism and specific (but equally vague) values and beliefs, produces a more or less unique understanding of violence and the implementation of this form of violence within American political culture. It becomes crucial to never speak from an aggressive or power-seeking position but always (without exception) to use violence to defend the values that inform American national identity and are thus existential to the survival of the nation. Or, on the other hand, to actively promote these values, again not from a position of self-interest, but bringing the shining light that is the US to firstly the rest of the regions beyond the frontier and then the rest of the world in the following century. This difference in how foreign policy is expressed through exceptionalism has been summarised by McCrisken as a tension between the US as 'exemplar nation' on the one hand or 'missionary nation' on the other. He argues that "[b]oth strands have been present throughout the history of US foreign relations" (McCracken, 2003, p. 2). The connection between a specific set of early established values, a focus on the role of the individual and underlying tropes of a mythological origin based on the belief in a Manifest Destiny, and the conviction of being a shining City upon a Hill with an exceptional history legitimised and normalised the omnipresence of violence and a specific formula for national identity within the broader process of becoming a nation.

The arrival of commercialised comic book superheroes from the 1930s onwards – at a time of crisis and existential questions about what America *really* is – did not happen on a blank slate. On the contrary,

the discursive material of superheroes permeated the American political and cultural landscape since its founding. Building on their framework of the American Monomyth, Jewett and Lawrence point out:

The connection of these superhero materials with the American religious heritage illustrates the displacement of the story of redemption. Only in a culture preoccupied for centuries with the question of salvation is the appearance of redemption through superheroes comprehensible. The secularization process in this instance did not eliminate the need for redemption, as the Enlightenment had attempted to do, but rather displaces it with superhuman agencies. Powers that the culture had earlier reserved for God and his angelic beings are transferred to an Everyman, conveniently shielded by an alter ego (2002, p. 4).

## The emergence of the superhero and World War II

This section engages with the emergence of superheroes in the 1930s against the backdrop of World War II. National identity seemed up for grabs in the late 1930s as the US remained undecided about how exactly to position themselves in the coming war. This is when superheroes take the interventionist side and appear as anti-isolationist discourses. Ultimately, World War II also helped to establish superheroes in American culture.

In the previous section, I talked about some of the mythical and discursive figures that prepared the ground for the later emergence of what we now call superheroes. It is noteworthy, however, that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century already provided indications of superheroic characters through the production of comic book heroes such as Hugo Hercules (1902-1903), published in the Chicago Tribune, or Lee Falk's Mandrake the Magician (1934) and The Phantom (1936) as influential in the development of the more elaborate and more popular characters a few years later (Coogan, 2013). Easthope on the other hand sees Superman in a tradition with popular fiction and folk stories such as Hiawatha, the Jungle Book or Tarzan of the Apes (Easthope, 1990). Building on a variety of cultural and political tropes that stem from the very origin of the American nation itself, the late 1930s and early 1940s gave birth to characters that were developed in such a sophisticated and relatable way that they could attract audiences way beyond the comic book's core readership. Even though they were produced by different publishers and were standing in competition with each other, Superman and Captain America developed a complementary sense of Americanness beyond the limited conceptualisation of foreign policy before the 1940s.

At this point in its history, the US was again trying to find its role in the world, as it had done on numerous occasions from the American Revolution to World War I. World War II was then instrumental in the way the relationship between America and the rest of the world would change. World War II now functions as a moral threshold and as the start of a new hegemonic role for the US: "World War II has long served as a touchstone for Americans seeking to ground an identity of both power and innocence during periods in which American power was tainted or delegitimated" (Dittmer, 2013, p. 94).

The role of strong, quasi-divine individuals who step up to save the nation was already a common trope at this point. As Umberto Eco describes in his analysis of Superman: a “hero equipped with powers superior to those of the common man has been a constant of the popular imagination” (1972, p. 14). Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* #1 in June 1938, Batman followed a year later in *Detective Comics* #2 and Wonder Woman in late 1941 in *All Star Comics* #8. Superman was already going to war with Hitler when Captain America joined the fray in March 1941. On the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1, ‘Cap’ punched Hitler in the face - a now-iconic image that continues to circulate in different media to this day. Thus, Captain America went to war with Hitler and Germany more than nine months before the US would. Interestingly, many of these characters were invented by Jewish writers appalled by the rampant anti-Semitism in Germany; Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the writers of Superman, as well as Bob Kane and Bill Finger, the creators of Batman, were second generation Jewish Americans. Not only were Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the creators of Captain America, Jewish but so was the fictional creator of their comic book superhero: Steve Rogers only becomes Captain America with the help of the Jewish scientist Dr Josef Reinstein and his super-soldier serum. The (meta)textual creation of Captain America can thus be read as an anti-isolationist counter-narrative to more isolationist discourses at the time (C. A. Scott, 2011). The creations of tall, and in Cap’s case blond, super-humans does not coincidentally invoke associations with the Nazi conception of the *Übermensch*. German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels even tried to rebuke the Jewish and American creations in an SS newspaper in 1940, possibly seeing competition for the Reich’s own creations (Sommerlad, 2018). Meanwhile in the US, Simon and Kirby received threatening letters from isolationists complaining that Cap went too far in displaying interventionist sentiments (Wright, 2001). Their rapidly increasing readership demonstrates how the early comic book superheroes were capable of (co-)producing the discourse of an interventionist foreign policy. As Goodrum argues:

It is certainly the case that readers who enjoyed watching Captain America punching Hitler did not necessarily support military intervention, only cultural, but it clearly demonstrates that there was an interest in Hitler, and perhaps almost a sense of inevitability about US involvement, which would, according to comic-books at least, bring about a swift and desirable resolution to the conflict (2016, p. 18)

The changing readership also changed the extent to which superheroes became popular at this time, managing to stay in the minds of Americans beyond the war and contributing to a culture in which the soldiers (and then veterans) gained a specific heroic status in American society (Murray, 2000).

World War II for America (re)created its very own origin story, a reboot for American national identity. Existential aggression and threat had to be defeated with military force and without hesitation (even though there was a lot of hesitation politically and societally), but never from the perspective of being the actual aggressor. This is best epitomised by Captain America, his star-spangled uniform and his

shield, a defensive weapon originally made for protection rather than aggression. As much as the origin story of superheroes was 'retconned' in the years to come, the more was US foreign policy retrospectively adapted to fit a 'good war' narrative of World War II (McCracken & Pepper, 2005). In his analysis of World War II, Michael Adams argues that all gender, racial, and class differences disappear in the way World War II has been mythologised, with grave consequences: "By setting up a golden age when everything was better, we inevitably undercut our own efforts because we know that we do not live in perfect times and that not all our solutions work" (1994 xiv). At the same time, the soldier experience has been sanitised and killing or maiming largely omitted from the dominant understanding of victory and triumph.

The December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor offered an ideal opportunity to frame the American nation as innocent and non-interventionist, entering the war justifiably to defend itself from foreign aggression. As Goodrum argues, once the entry into World War II was secured, superheroes took a step back to let the real heroes go to work (2016). Ultimately, World War II was narrating a history of America and the rest of the world that seemed all too fitting to what had long been inherent within how the US understood themselves. As William Appleman Williams argues, "Americans were convinced that they were defending an anticolonial democracy charged with a duty to regenerate the world. They also had come firmly to believe that their own prosperity and democracy depended upon the continued expansion of their economic system" (1972, p. 201). This is also how the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could be interpreted within the defensive frame, albeit this narrative always remained fragile and ambivalent (Engelhardt & Linenthal, 1996). But it has to be defended even more so. Ultimately, for Americans, World War II "has become a benchmark of excellence, not only in things military but in all areas of life" (Adams, 1994, p. 3).

### Going beyond World War II

This section will explore how superheroes tried to grapple with the time after World War II as much as the American nation did. The attempt by consecutive administrations to forge continuity and foster the victory of World War II was accompanied by superheroes but mostly in their role as lonely, individualistic saviours. The existential battle against evil becomes endemic while America struggles to maintain a sense of identity and triumph. This eventually opens the door for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The lesson learned from the two world wars was that not only was American action benign and liberating but that American interests would coincide with the interests of the rest of the world (Hunt, 2009). As Ronnie Lipschutz describes it, "The expectation was that peace would reign, unimpeded, around the world. That the United States was the most powerful country in the world, and the sole possessor of the atomic bomb, only reinforced this belief. After all, American intentions were of the

best, and no one could doubt them” (2001, p. 25). The idea was to usher in a golden age in which self-interest and global altruism come to mean the same thing (Fousek, 2000).

What becomes obvious quite quickly is that the golden age would not happen. Robert Putnam argues in length how civic engagement decreased drastically after World War II, opening the question of how to retain a sense of community and self (2000). America and its belief to reign in an American century might also have to do with its narcissistic culture (Lasch, 1991). The Soviet Union was rising up as a new challenge for US foreign policy and as a new form of existential threat, however, superheroes needed some time to adapt. Captain America, for example, was discontinued for a major part of the 1950s showing how heroes and superheroes, fictional or real, did not really know what to do. With the Captain’s shield retired, it seems like America was out of touch with itself facing a new threat. Tony Shaw’s characterisation of the Cold War is revealing:

The world was segregated like never before during the Cold War. Two ‘sub-universes’ – the capitalist and communist sphere – coexisted, with their inhabitants mixing, for the most part, only when it suited their governments. The result was an information gap, especially about what life was really like on what came to be known as ‘the other side’. This void was filled by official propaganda and intense media speculation, most of which helped characterise the Cold War as a bipolar phenomenon fought between two systems whose mores values and politics represented mutually exclusive ways of life. Cinema on both sides of the ideological divide reinforced this vision (Shaw, 2009, p. 370).

With new technological possibilities and far greater means for wider distribution, cinema became a battleground for the Cold War. It required some effort to metaphorically equate Hitler with Stalin, after being allied to the USSR for four years, shifting the discourse on the Soviet Union as not only an external threat (Wittkopf & McCormick, 1990) but as an existential, global, evil empire. Shaw continues, however, by saying that “a cultural Cold War had been simmering for three decades already across parts of Europe, Asia and North America” with its roots in the ‘red scare’ of 1919-1920 (2009, p. 367).

In the early post-World War II period, governmental agencies gained more and more interest in cinema, making the global distribution of film and other American cultural products a prerequisite to the Marshall Plan (A. J. Scott, 2004). The FBI had their first Entertainment Liaison Office (ELO) as early as the 1930s. The Pentagon, founded in 1947, established ELOs for all branches of the military a year later (Alford & Secker, 2017). As Matthew Alford argues, “the film industry routinely promotes the dubious notion that the United States is a benevolent force in world affairs and that unleashing its military strength overseas has positive results for humanity” (2010, p. 3). In subsequent decades, the Pentagon and the CIA (which established their ELO in 1996) gained massive influence in the film making industry which includes wide possibilities to change screenplays, having people within the production process, having informal ties to Hollywood, as well as establishing ties to Hollywood by having people on the payroll of the DoD or the CIA working in Hollywood (Robb, 2004; Schou, 2016). The institutional and

textual ties between DoD, Intelligence Services, and Hollywood meant that security, intelligence, and the relationship between the state and their citizens was negotiated crucially in film (Slocum, 2013; Willmetts, 2016). This also produced the “Hollywood convention of the independent hero who defies the power of the authorities so he can do the right thing” (Kooijman, 2013, p. 87).

Regarding a genre preceding the superhero genre, the Western took a crucial role in how individualistic heroism could shape a society. Richard Slotkin argues that “the preoccupation with violence that characterizes the Western and the Myth of the Frontier made its formulations particularly useful during a period of continual conflict between the claims of democratic procedure and Cold War policies that required the use of armed force” (1992, p. 350). *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) displays one starting point for both film and the Western as a genre; later on, *The Searchers* (1956), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), Sergio Leone’s Dollars Trilogy (1964-1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) brought all the themes from the isolated hero, the freedom of the West, the conflict between federal government and individual, and the Frontier experience to the cinemas. They connect in a nostalgic way to a time where things were apparently simpler, where the bad guys were identifiable not only through their actions but even through their black hats. Most importantly, “Westerns are not historical or even fictionalized versions of any moment in the American past but rather myths. Their symbolic quality permits the straightforward exportation of Western themes into the real world of U.S. politics” (Kord & Krimmer, 2011, p. 62). In this way they greatly connect to superheroic narratives but also aesthetics in multiple ways: The colours of the hats as marker for good and evil find their continuation in the way clothing plays a role for superheroes and villains; the defence of private property and the status quo as well as a high suspicion against centralised government and all its institutions expressed through an overwhelming sense of individualism; and the dehistoricised nature of the diegesis, this is to say that the plot and the elements the filmic world consists of are void of any historical context which makes them a valid carrier of national identity even years later.

For some cultural scholars, the connection between societal and political shifts and the development of the superhero genre were a matter of interest quite early. (Skidmore & Skidmore, 1983). The Golden Age of comic books, roughly lasting from 1938 to the mid-1950s, brought a preliminary end to the Captain America comics as the genre lacked direction as it struggled to know what to do after the Nazis had been beaten. He would return in 1953 as Commie Smasher, reacting to anti-Soviet sentiments of the time (Dittmer, 2013). The production and circulation of comic books were increasingly impeded against the backdrop of McCarthyism and the coinciding development of the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The implementation of the CCA followed multiple Senate hearings with the German psychiatrist Fredric Wertham who saw comic books as an imminent threat for the Youth, leading to a heavily censored creative process of comic book writers (Wright, 2001). This demonstrates to what extent

comic books were seen as influential media. While McCarthyism and Wertham's intervention were not directly connected, they both were very much concerned about comic book productions and their effect on the Cold War as "fears raised by Wertham about sexuality and deviance engaged with the idea that future generations would be unable to uphold the global role of the US as a result of their corruption by popular culture" (Goodrum, 2016, p. 87)

The shift of older characters was complemented by the appearance of a swathe of new ones during the Silver Age of comic books running from the mid-1950s to the 1970s. Marvel Comics produced characters such as Hulk (1962), Thor (1962), Spider-Man (1962), Iron Man (1963), Black Widow (1964) and the collective team of The Avengers (1963). On the DC Comics side, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman and the likes of Green Lantern (1940), Flash (1940), Aquaman (1941) and Martian Manhunter (1955) founded the collective Justice League in 1960, a move instantly reacted to by Marvel with the creation of the Fantastic Four a year later. The characters as well as the emerging superhero teams developed a more international outlook, quite often going to places outside of the US and creating a strong relationship with allies without losing their individualistic appeal overall, tying the superhero back to the gunfighter as he is "psychically troubled and isolated from normal society by something 'dark' in his nature and/or his past. But that 'darkness' is bound up with and expressed by his highly specialized social function: he is a killer by profession, usually for money" (Slotkin, 1992, p. 383). As Wright argues, the demands of World War II and the Cold War had subverted whatever individuality superheroes like Superman and Batman had once possessed for the sake of the national consensus (2001, p. 207).

Superheroes made it possible to "study our values and gain a perspective on our history" (Berger, 1971, p. 171). Coming from the experience of World War II, Skidmore and Skidmore still observe a transition of superhero characters: "Not coincidentally, these heroes began to emerge in the early 1960s, an era when many Americans began to entertain serious doubts about the viability of using old methods to solve new, more complex problems. It was an era that promoted self-doubt" (Lang & Trimble, 1988, p. 167). The role of superheroes in the post-World War era underlined the questions that the Cold War raised regarding US foreign policy and, once more, how the US aimed to position itself in the world. Mondello in his analysis of the comic books of *The Amazing Spider-Man* in the 1960s and 1970s argues that Spider-Man addresses the political issues of the time and "became a subtle persuader, fashioning and reflecting public and popular attitudes under the rubric of entertainment [...] Superman came to us in a period of consensus; Spider-Man had to find consensus in an era of conflict" (1976, p. 236)

The Bronze Age of comic books then lasted from 1970 to the mid-1980s and was very much connected to crises such as Vietnam and Watergate: "The former, an international political crisis, cast doubt on



the desired global role of the US and its ability to achieve that, and the latter, a domestic political crisis, called into question beliefs about national character and institutions” (Goodrum, 2016, p. 178). As with all superheroes, but especially Captain America, “America goes through periodic bouts of self-questioning and doubt” (Dittmer, 2007, p. 258). Captain America, stripping himself of his star-spangled uniform and becoming the hero *Nomad*, a man without country, in 1974 due to his disappointment with the corruption of the American polity that leads all the way up to the president was an obvious reaction to the Watergate Scandal of 1972-74. After a few issues and his engagement with the good people of the nation that he meets on his travels around the US, he picks up his uniform again. Comic book writer Steve Englehart puts it this way: “Captain America, the star-spangled superhero from the hallowed halls of Marveldom, has undergone a metamorphosis that parallels America’s movement from the super-patriotic Forties to the disillusioned present” (quoted in Lang & Trimble, 1988, p. 68).

Furthermore, superheroes underscored the overarching theme of nuclear anxiety during the Cold War. After all, Spider-Man, Hulk and Iron Man as well as a variety of characters in their stories evolve around (nuclear) energy, uncontrollable forces and unimaginable destruction, metaphorically speaking to the fear of the atomic bomb. Additionally, story arches like the X-Men (1963) illustrate an “overtly political” (Trushell, 2004, p. 155) agenda of Silver Age comic books. The X-Men – somewhat loosely drawing on nuclear tropes and the civil rights movement through their campaign for the recognition of mutant rights – managed to introduce a “quality of irony, coupled with the openly anti-heroic nature of many of the lead characters” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 84). This also applies to other superheroes. The tension between what is heroic and what is anti-heroic becomes more elaborate and a deeper sense of the weaknesses of superheroes is developed in the 1970s, underscoring the post-Vietnam and Watergate feeling of paralysis and stagnation (Pustz, 2012).

The attempt to bring superheroes into other media had been a long-standing project of both Marvel and DC and was to some extent realised. *Captain America* (1944) had his first mini-series very early on, loosely based on the comic book superhero. DC managed to have their own outlet with the semi-comedic series *Batman* (1966-1968) on ABC, starring Adam West in the title role. The specific aesthetics of the show and the performance of West and others created an image of Batman, Robin, Alfred, and the Joker that had a lasting cultural effect even though it was very different from the developing comic book portrayals. However, the first influential superhero production on the silver screen came with *Superman* (1978). For the first time, a superhero (played by the relatively unknown Christopher Reeve) became the main character of a Hollywood blockbuster production. The film opened the door for a total of three sequels between 1980 and 1987 and implemented the role of superheroes on film (Bettinson, 2018). With relatively solid performances at the box offices, *Superman II* (1980) and

*Superman III* (1983) underscored the success of *Superman* which was only beaten by *Grease* at the American box office in 1978 and had great results in international cinemas as well.

Not original or unique to the Cold War, Hollywood had demonstrated over decades that it produces myths and symbols that permeate “America’s historical consciousness” and operates as an “unwitting recorder of national moods” (Rollins, 1998, p. 1). It is thus no surprise that the unstable and crisis-prone years of the end of the US engagement in Vietnam and the renewed freeze of the Cold War under Reagan produced a variety of action and science fiction films that encapsulate the tension between a national identity crisis, existential security crises and nuclear nightmares. As Johnson indicates:

By the time of Reagan’s administration the idea of American victory had developed a new urgency following the military defeat in Vietnam. Previous incidents of defeat in American history had become incorporated into larger narratives as ‘mobilizing preludes to victory,’ such as Alamo or Pearl Harbor. [...] The withdrawal from and loss of the long, divisive and destructive war in Vietnam, however, had challenged American identity through its upheaval of traditional assumptions about American victory – its inevitability and its deservedness (2008, p. 7)

The franchises of *Star Wars* (1977-1983), *Alien* (1979-1997), and *Rambo* (1982-1988) revive late Cold War anxieties and Vietnam war trauma. But they also reshape the relationship between predominantly male heroes and the American society: “This association of the loss of the war with the government and the honor of the war with the soldier reconstitutes one of the principal thematics of U.S. culture, in which individual interests exist in tension with those of the society as a whole” (Susan Jeffords, 1989, p. 5). Jeffords sees the perceived crisis of American engagement with the world as leading to a re-masculinisation of America.

Superman first arrived at a time in which it was yet unclear what role the US would be playing in World War II. Superman in this sense is a connection to US national identity and the way of American life, showcasing the history of the ideal American immigrant. However, Superman’s interaction with other nations had always been undertaken in a very careful manner by DC (Tye, 2013). In *Superman II* (1980) the US president is surrendering to General Zod in the White House for the sake of the people of the world just before he calls for Superman’s help. As Soares argues, “the American president presumes to speak for the rest of the world, even in the act of surrender. This display is perhaps the last instance of Superman’s sure footing as American icon in a world experiencing intensified globalization” (Soares, 2015, p. 757). This is to say that the Superman films of the 1980s might also be read as “solidly conservative fantasies” (O’Meara, Macleod, Gagnon, & Grondin, 2016, p. 151) in the way they display American national security and a Reaganite notion of foreign policy. Following Soares’ argument, however, it became clear that superheroic characters had to navigate their way around the world differently if they wanted to remain in touch with audiences beyond the US.

What became a crucial pattern especially during the Reagan years is the intensifying attempt to fit the disillusionment of the Cold War years into a victory narrative. Reagan framed the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' in May 1983 only a month before *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983) was released with its defeat of the Empire by Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia and the rebel forces (Reagan, 1983). This framing was built on a speech he delivered as a candidate, relabelling US engagement everywhere but especially in Vietnam as a 'noble cause' (Reagan, 1980). In this sense, Reagan deepened an unlikely but still present sentiment that the US stepped out of World War II as a lonely power burdened with the future of the world (Gindin & Panditch, 2006) while it faced an existential threat. The 'evil empire' analogy then helped make complex historical questions and the confrontation with the Soviet Union into a streamlined and easily understandable continuation of World War II through the Cold War (Colás & Saull, 2006; Pach, 2006). Crucially this came at a time when "most contemporary Americans preferred the stride of Luke Skywalker or John Wayne no matter their policies might be" to the self-abasing soul-searching of Jimmy Carter (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, p. 117). It was easier for superheroes, in the twilight years of the Cold War confrontation and the reheating of conflict, to position themselves as a more contemplative, liberal, and global figure (DuBose, 2007; Soares, 2015).

This turn to a more global audience on film was ultimately executed in *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987) where Superman tries to rid the world of nuclear weapons against the very real backdrop of the decline of the Soviet Union. Despite the box office disaster that the film turned out to be, it "made remarkable inroads in the transformation of the character into a global figure who attempted to make a difference as a citizen of the world" (Soares, 2015, p. 751).

On the side of the comic books, the 1980s signified a shift to a darker version of superheroic characters with a focus on their troubled nature. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-1987) show ambiguous and to some extent anti-heroic characters that become a lot more realistic or at least graspable. The Batman films made between 1989 and 1997 are analysed by Jeffords as a metaphor for how the focus on the male hard body (as seen, for example, in the Rambo films) and masculine identity shifts to a form of masculinity that is more fragmented and troubled. Jeffords draws a strong link between specific shifts during the Reagan administration that also play out in popular culture, the Batman films then stand for the transition period between Reagan and Bush: "As in the Bush presidency, the hard body is being both rejected and embraced, recognized as a burden and as a necessity, as something to hide at the interpersonal level and as something to display in the public arena, as a source of fear and of attraction, of goodness and destruction" (1994, p. 97). These darker, more contemplative versions of superheroes go hand in hand with the post-Vietnam era and the re-entrenchment of partisanship within the US starting in the 1980s. The Vietnam experience demonstrated the increasing difficulty of maintaining America's post-World War victory culture, as in

Vietnam war films “the war is not presented so much in the realm of history or memory as it is projected beyond history and memory into the present. The Vietnam War, one feels, never really ends” (Anderegg, 1991, p. 4). As Engelhardt argues, the lack of an enemy that is victoriously defeated becomes more and more obvious after 1945, eventually leading to the collapse of a victory culture after the Vietnam experience in 1975 (1995).

As for the Batman films, Spigel and Jenkins analyse that they demonstrate how popular texts can endure over decades and can so intersect with our own life histories. This also affects how history and memory might get blurred. Batman functions then as

a transitional space where people actively used their previous encounters with mass culture to reshape and understand their relation to larger social practices. Popular memory, then, is the place where private and public pasts meet. At this crossroads we find a mix of personal and collective fantasies that transform the products of mass culture into the tools of everyday life (Spigel & Jenkins, 1991, p. 144).

Batman and his other superheroic colleagues remained constants within the national mythology of the US throughout decades and were going through the same circles of crisis and uncertainty. The wide variety of superheroes and their stories also produces a variety of different narratives underpinning the characters. Superman and Batman, for example, share the loss of home and parents (and thus childhood trauma), a sense for justice and order coupled with a disdain for governmental control. They live virtuous and ascetic lives, connecting them back to Campbell’s monomyth. However, the differences are quite clear: While Batman does not have any natural superpowers, Superman does; while Batman has to hide his real persona Bruce Wayne under a mask, Superman has to hide his real identity by becoming Clark Kent; while Superman can save the world and is usually portrayed as a stand-in for a global force for good, Batman’s crime-fighting vigilante actions are usually restricted to Gotham City. Nonetheless, the diversity in their characters only amplifies their appeal over decades as different audiences will pick different *favourite superheroes*. This can also be seen in the origin stories of the 1930s and 1940s, while the superheroes grew stronger through their trauma, and also in terms of the villains “the trauma invariably drives them to madness and a life of crime, if not a quest for world domination, the latter reflecting the anxieties about fascism that were particularly prevalent during Batman’s [and Superman’s] early years” (Boichel, 1991, p. 8).

### The new millennium

The discursive strength of these texts (which also makes them excellent cinematic and commercial commodities) lies therefore not only in the comprehensiveness of their actual origin but their dehistoricised adaptability over time. During the Cold War, despite their flux and crises, superheroes opened up spaces for identity politics to be negotiated via their comic books first, then in TV series and ultimately films. While Marvel had problems growing into a multimedia company due to financial and

production issues (Flanagan et al., 2016), DC thanks to their affiliation with Time Warner managed to produce four Superman and four Batman films over the period of almost 20 years. Superman underscores the intensification of the Cold War and introduces wider audiences to its text while Batman functions rather as “dark postmodern text” (Spigel & Jenkins, 1991, p. 144). As O’Meara et al argue, the four Batman films alongside other blockbusters “raised aspects of looming post-Cold War security anxieties in ways that rooted these in Americanist mythology while rendering them accessible to a global audience” (2016, p. 187). Evil was mostly committed by insane individuals like Jack Nicholson’s Joker and not by specific nations or peoples, fitting into a narrative on terrorists and terrorism that would soon emerge. Superheroes on film and in comic books seemed to have less and less grip on how things are supposed to be now during the 1990s. Reynolds argues: “Within the last 30 years, all this has changed. The normality which the superhero sees as so valuable seems to be constantly in a state of seige [sic]” (1992, p. 82). It does not come as a surprise that the ending of the Cold War created the impression of an American identity in permanent crisis, no longer existentially threatened by the Soviet Union or the idea of communism itself, but even more unsure of its future and searching for new enemies to construct its identity against. This had clear detrimental effects on the relationship between reality and exception. A monolithic Other, in the form of Hitler’s fascist fantasy of the *Übermensch*, had given birth to the American answer in Superman; later the Cold War threat of monolithic communism led by the Soviet Union had given rise to a whole new generation of American superhero characters. As Thomson argues: “Despite the obvious differences, however, in both cases the chosen hero functions like a mirror, reflecting back to the group an idealized image of itself, an ideal concentrated and so given an almost *superhuman* form” (2005, p. 100). The superhero is not unique to American culture. But specific tropes, narratives, and histories within American culture were ingrained into American national identity so that the political culture produced character after character since the 1930s so that the US was equipped with an arsenal of different characters fighting for the survival of the nation and – in most cases – the world. Technological developments made it possible for superheroes to transcend their mere existence in comic books, even though comics remained crucial to the development of superhero stories. Ultimately, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world had already spent around 60 years watching superheroes save the day. Technological development, the globalisation of audiences, and the ultimate crisis with ‘9/11’ resulted in the emergence of the still ongoing rise of superheroes but now much more focused on the silver screen.

After the Cold War, superheroes are established and “positioned as a bridge between the certainties and nostalgic simplicity of the past and the ambiguous, complex world of today” (Goodrum, 2016, p. 113). As the first stand-alone Marvel film production in this new era, *X-Men* was released in the summer of 2000, premiering in New York which also serves as the location for most of the plot. For the most

part, the film is a simple, liberal narrative. For example, it features the UN and their relationship to the US in a way that does not occur anymore in any film after, namely giving the international organisation almost equal space and an actual voice. Terence McSweeney sees *X-Men* as “a resolutely pre-9/11 text and functions primarily as a vivid allegory of race relations, which has been one of the enduring interpretations of the comic-book series since its original release” (McSweeney, 2014, p. 113).

It is because of this diversity of issues and problems that it seems almost logical that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox decided to test out the X-Men narrative to herald the new millennium. As Housel/Wisniewski argue:

The X-Men franchise has made billions of dollars over the last forty-five years from major motion pictures, animated television shows, video games, and, of course, the best-selling comic series in American history. [...] The X-Verse is a large and diverse place full of complex storylines, timelines, seemingly endless character (2009, p. 1)

However, it is not merely the economic success that makes the X-Men so interesting but rather how they encapsulate anxieties and hopes connected to the assumed beginning of a new era. But as we know now, things would change very soon.

In positioning themselves as authors of crisis, foreign policy, identity and security, the presence of superheroes in their embodied forms in comic books, and successively films and other cultural products, as well as merchandise made them important carriers of the existential conflicts of World War II, the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, paradoxically at a time when specific forms of heroism were increasingly questioned. This “questioning of the hero emerges even more directly in those philosophical counter-movements to millennial despair (post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-imperialism, and the like) which seek to get us beyond our destructive desire to get beyond (our limits, borders, finitude, and so on)” (Thomson, 2005, p. 113). Following this argument, it is important to keep in mind that the emergence and subsequent rise of superheroes have to be seen as a parallel development to the increasing questioning of old myths and narrative within the rise of post-modernism. Against the backdrop of “Nietzsche’s Death of God, superheroes offer re-articulations of religious myths, but from the explicit framework of secularized popular culture” (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 21). One of the key features that made superhero mythologies graspable, desirable and a reliant navigator through crisis is how they express continuity: “Continuity, and above all metatextual structural continuity, is the strategy through which superhero texts most clearly operate as myths. Continuity provides the interaction with the audience which characterizes mythological discourse” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 45).

Superheroes and how we understand them now took their place on the stage just at a time when a figurehead was needed to re-write and re-negotiate America’s role in the world. Superheroes have adopted this role as authors of national identity and foreign policy, writing themselves into the fabric

of American cultural and political life to such a degree that they cannot be divorced from each other. At the same time superhero texts are almost always designed not only to apply to American audiences but – very much like US foreign policy itself – to form and establish the relationship with the rest of the world. For this purpose and despite being clearly connected to American national identity, superheroes successfully and carefully negotiated their position as American figures with international appeal; this furthermore explains their global presence far beyond the American cultural market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explained how superheroes were created and from early on were connected to the American nation. First, the origin of the American nation was tied to a variety of myths, Manifest Destiny and the Frontier experience among the most important ones, also called American Monomyth. This is important as these myths and associated values such as freedom, liberty, individualism, etc., are still playing a crucial role in the way the American nation is constituted today. Second, superheroes emerged from this developing American culture in comic books in the 1930s at a time when American national identity was undecided and unclear, especially in its relationship with global political developments. Captain America and Superman went to war with Hitler before the United States did as texts deliberately designed to overcome the doubts of American isolationism. Eventually, the experience of World War II and the emerging comic book genre formed the basis for American victory culture, producing yet another myth that is still resonating with contemporary discourses about US foreign policy and threat. Third, at the beginning of the Cold War superheroes seemed to be in decline, having won the World War and took time to adapt to the new existential threat of the bipolar confrontation between East and West yet. However, eventually the comic book producers of an expanding range of superheroes found ways to engage with the Cold War and the questions it raised for American identity, making the jump from featuring more or less exclusively in comics to the production of cartoon and live-action TV series. After developing a more international outlook in the 1960s, the experiences of Vietnam and Watergate made them more inward-looking again, but also more politically critical. The 1980s and 1990s featured the first big cinematic productions in form of the Superman and Batman film series. But as much as with the American nation, superheroes seemed to lose purpose at the end of the century, lacking a clear and existential antagonist after the demise of Soviet communism. While superheroes reacted to crisis narratives during the Cold War, ‘victory’ did not bring the desired catharsis. Stephenson argues in the mid-1990s “that never in U.S. history have prophetic destiny and mission been in such doubt. The instinctual return to [President Woodrow] Wilson is symptomatic of this. In the absence of simple enemies, his is the most identifiably American program available for those who wish the nation to play a cooperative yet leading role in the world” (Stephenson, 1995, p. 129). This chapter has shown how myths that are still playing a role in American

national identity to this day were already very elaborately outlined in the founding of the nation, and that they were primed and ready to become mainstays of superhero narratives in the twentieth century that would then come to dominate our cinema screens in the opening two decades of the twenty-first century. As Baudrillard suggests, “American reality... was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind, that it is the refraction of a giant screen” (2010, p. 55). The September 11 attacks, the new millennium, and a new existential crisis would give superheroes the chance to thrive in this medium.



## Chapter 3 – Bush and the road to the ‘War on Terror’

### Introduction

This chapter will analyse how the superhero genre emerged parallel with the ‘War on Terror’ and how both ‘9/11’ and the superhero films co-constitute each other. Despite the big success of *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 3*, it would not be until *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* in the summer of 2008 that superheroes returned as interlocutor of the terrorism crisis. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the path into infinite war under Bush, narrated and shaped by the re-emerging genre. First, I will focus on ‘9/11’ itself as a cultural and dehistoricised phenomenon and the role that superhero films could play in it. Additionally, discourses around ‘9/11’ were shrouded in heroism from the very beginning. Second, I will address why superhero texts and narratives revealed to be ideal carriers of the traumatic event through their specific focus on origin stories and the terrorist attacks as American experience. Third, I will argue that, while the superhero films avoided clear references to ‘9/11’, they very successfully develop a coded text in which the ‘War on Terror’ is invisible but always present. At the same time, the films create a tension between continuity and crisis. Fourth, I will address how the films of the late Bush era, most dominantly *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*, were criticising the current ways of the ‘War on Terror’ while opening up the question of whether they can be read as counter-narratives. The films also ushered in the way to a new form of conflict resolution and foreign policy with the emergence of Obama as a quasi-heroic figure and his campaign of hope and change.

### ‘9/11’

In this section, I will address how the attacks of September 11, 2001, became the mythologically charged ‘9/11’. At the same time, ‘9/11’ and the ‘War on Terror’ had to be constructed and implemented in American society as the way things are now. My argument is that ‘9/11’ was as much a political crisis as it was a cultural one, emphasising the role popular culture played in the way the event was interpreted and solutions for it thought. Gonçalves argues that ‘9/11’ should not be read “as a singular event but as a mnemonic singularity, a catastrophic event that evokes or mimics, although in a renewed situation or context, the representational structure of past catastrophic events” (2016, p. 4; Westwell, 2014). Given the identity crisis America went through without a powerful antagonist, one might argue that ‘9/11’ in a discursive, security sense displayed the real ending of the Cold War:

September 11 supplied a conclusive ending to the cold war even as it permitted the state to inaugurate an utterly different social configuration. The description of the site of the attack on the World Trade Center as “Ground Zero” supplied this scene with a representation that the bombing of Hiroshima had installed in the national psyche as one of the terrifying images with which to imagine the conclusion of the cold war. The Shock and Awe campaign with which the Bush administration inaugurated its response to these attacks became the first event in a total war – the Global War on Terror – whose powers of governance surpassed even the reach of the cold war (Pease, 2009, p. 154)

Among other people who likened the attacks on the World Trade Center to a cultural crisis, Stuart Croft quotes from an online diary describing the course of the day on September 11, 2001: "I kept thinking, 'This is just like that movie ARMAGEDDON.' And I hadn't even seen it" (World Trade Center journal quoted in Croft, 2006, p. 265). The similarity to disasters, catastrophes, and terror was already mapped out in hundreds of cultural artefacts such as the comic books Americans read and the films and tv series they watched. The fact that the event was broadcasted globally and consumed in real-time by millions reinforced the allegedly unprecedented nature of it, the scale of the destruction and the lives lost. Films such as *Independence Day* (1996) or *Armageddon* (1998), with their visceral destructions of iconic American and international sites, gave American and global audiences the visual and narrative blueprint or guide to frame what had happened (Altheide, 2010). At the same time, as the quote from Croft's analysis indicates, even when audiences were unfamiliar with a specific text that could be connected to the event, the event itself was something that was already known as part of the life world of cinematic audiences (Carver, 2010). This also indicated that the meaning of the images, from the destruction of the buildings to the loss of life, cannot be detached from their spectacular nature, that the spectacle rather than anything else contributed to the event's interpretation:

In essence, the spectacle of the attacks viewed through the medium of television fractured the common rhetorical resources of a society raised on a steady diet of virtual violence. There seemed to be no words to express fully what was taking place because its realness was in doubt – most of what appears on television is after all, unreal (R. Jackson, 2005, pp. 30-31).

The event then, ultimately, can be read as much as a piece of fiction as it was real, as terroristic events "are frequently perceived, in their senseless atrocity, as a kind of fictional reality" (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 4). Terrorism then became "a perspective, an orientation, and a discourse for 'our time', the 'way things are today,' and 'how the world has changed'" (Altheide, 2010, p. 15). If the '9/11' attacks were culturally and, as a consequence, politically anticipated and already inscribed into the collective historical memory before there was a history to tell, then this shows how the connection between what really happened on that day and what was made of it have little to do with each other. As Baudrillard observed: "The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience" (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 5).

This leads to Sheldon Wolin's analysis that in "the aftermath of September 11 the American citizen was propelled into the realm of mythology, a new and different dimension of being, unworldly, where occult forces are bent on destroying a world that had been created for the children of light" (Wolin, 2008, p. 10). These mythological figures were not new of course, they were built on the assumption that America was an innocent nation that is not to blame for the violent event, whose core values were threatened by an existential threat and evil enemy. Ultimately, the burden fell to America to fight not

only for the security of America but for the rest of the world under American leadership, much like the fictional US-led by Bill Pullman's President Whitmore in *Independence Day* (Barber, 2004; Croft, 2006). For many Americans, the response in form of the 'War on Terror' seemed right and rational at the time but "more importantly, to many people it feels like the right thing to do. In this way, the *language* of the 'war on terrorism' normalises and reifies the *practice* of the 'war on terrorism'; it comes to be accepted as part of the way things naturally are" (R. Jackson, 2005, p. 2). Croft argues in a similar way as he analyses how the interpretation of '9/11' as crisis and the implementation of the 'War on Terror' was only one of many different possible responses but "[n]one of these alternative narratives seems persuasive now, for it seems to be common sense that things turned out as they did. Such is the power of a successful, and hence decisive, intervention; it is not simply a question of 'letting the facts speak for themselves'" (Croft, 2006, p. 113).

The event was quickly transformed into images of heroism – newspapers, television channels, and online media were full of firefighters as the embodiment of the showcasing of the heroicism that '9/11' was reinterpreted as, while the victims were "reinscribed as heroes who sacrificed their lives" (Edkins, 2002, p. 250). The event collapsed into myth, as an event without a history, or, as Baudrillard puts it, the "absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 4). Not surprisingly, the event was negotiated against the backdrop of exceptionalism, in this case, as Bush phrased it on the evening of September 11, 2001: "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today, our nation saw evil – the very worst of human nature – and we responded with the best of America" (Bush, 2001b). As Der Derian analyses: "By funneling the experience through the image of American exceptionalism, 9/11 quickly took on an exceptional ahistoricity. For the most part, history was only invoked – mainly in the sepia tones of the Second World War – to prepare America for the sacrifice and suffering that lay ahead" (2009, p. 230). This is to say that the past of American foreign policy was already shrouded in myths and the heightened invocation of 'victory' and 'goodness' so that even World War II, in this example, becomes a distant notion out of time. The past was to be visited but only if the US could remain an innocent force (D. Campbell, 2002). The dominant discursive elements allowed little reflection on past actions of the US itself, rather "the events of September 11 are the 'cause' of its policies today. We may not, however, ask how we got there lest we be disrespectful of the dead" (Zehfuss, 2003, p. 520). The void, characterised by Jack Holland as a mixture of disbelief, denial, and horror, was soon to be filled by interpretation of the events as crisis, embedded within cultural discourses: "Citizens turned to personal levels of understanding and popular cultural sources of meaning due to the lack of prevalent discourses capable of adequately articulating the events" (Jack Holland, 2013, p. 83).

That the discourse employed by the Bush administration was not moulded out of something completely new and that '9/11' did not ultimately change how the world operates is furthermore argued in Tsui's reading of the 'War on Terror'. Going back to Reagan and Clinton he argues that "during the tenure of Clinton's presidency, the US government established a solid rhetorical foundation that encouraged the majority of the American public to conceptualise terrorist violence in a very specific way" (2017, p. 53). Following this argument, it was the specific framing of conceptions of threat and terrorism as well as counter-terrorism policies that demonstrate a strong continuum between Reagan, Clinton and Bush. Especially the framing of counter-terrorism as war and the identification of al Qaeda and bin Laden as threats by Clinton illustrate how '9/11' works rather along a continuum than a breaking point in history (Tsui, 2017). This is not to say that this empirical evidence was taken into account, either by political elites or by the broader public. What remains largely unchanged from the perspective of Bush, many Americans and their allies, '9/11' was and is still seen as a day that changed the very basis of international politics, security and US foreign policy.

Be that as it may, it becomes clear that how we understand and debate things has changed drastically and is still changing in the course of the 'War on Terror', a term first coined by President George W. Bush on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001: "Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it doesn't end there" (Bush, 2001a). Richard Jackson in his analysis of the rhetoric behind '9/11' and the 'War on Terror' argues that these discourses were carefully shaped and rhetorically implemented by Bush and his administration. The social construction of the 'War on Terror' was set out as a "large-scale project of political violence" that required "a significant degree of political and social consensus" (R. Jackson, 2005, p. 1).

The traumatic experience, the confusion and helplessness but even more so the discursive interpretation of '9/11' together with violent events of the past asked the question if it was even possible to accurately represent the event in American culture, or if it was even allowed (Brady, 2004; W. W. Dixon, 2004). Because this ambivalence cannot be resolved '9/11' had to become erased and omitted while at the same time omnipresent in virtually every element of the American experience and everyday. As Christine Muller argues, in "its immediate aftermath, September 11 was perceived as a social purgation, with the day's horror and its aftermath's uncertainties suddenly (and ultimately only temporarily) rendering obsolete arbitrary preoccupations" (2017, p. 148). At the forefront of the post-'9/11' mythology was the notion that by "September 12, our culture was already reworking a national tragedy into a national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph" (Faludi, 2007, p. 289). Explanations for the attacks surrounded the idea that the US was attacked out of hatred for their way of life: "From that perspective, the jihadists' hatred of America is tantamount to hatred of democratic rights and liberties, which is to say that the 9/11 attacks were aimed less at a single political entity (the United States) than at a larger ethical and constitutional principle (freedom)" (Frank, 2018, p. 345). Although it seems

typical for the American understanding of its own foreign policy and the mostly inverted view on others' motives, this was clearly heightened after '9/11'.

The crisis of '9/11' collapsed the sense of historical and political categories along spatial and temporal lines. Comic books and literary work could react quickly to the event, producing a variety of depictions to narrate and make sense of it (L. Bell, 2017; Jenkins, 2006). The cinematic superhero genre also slowly developed into a growing force, mostly driven by the Spider-Man trilogy and the Warner Brothers productions of *Batman Begins* and *Superman Returns*. The films as well as their comic book predecessors consist of overt crisis narratives connected to notions of threat. The often-traumatic origins story of the superheroes is connected to gigantic battles in mostly urban spaces, showcasing spectacular destruction. This is crucial as the urban space recreates New York as a battlefield. While New York later features in films such as *The Avengers* explicitly, in films featuring Batman and Superman New York is coded as Gotham or Metropolis while still being very much recognisable as American city. On the one hand, this establishes the urban space as the space for battle vs the rural space as space of tranquillity. On the other hand, it ties the battle the superheroes are fighting to American soil as even the more coded depictions of the urban and the rural springs from American notions of the city harbouring crime and being the space where the Twin Towers fell while appealing to the countryside as the space where true and original American values reside.

Superhero films then lend themselves to be seen as '9/11' fantasies without being explicit about it. This also applies to other genres of the time that try to navigate between the desire to go back to normal while having the knowledge that things are different now than they were before (Purse, 2011; Spigel, 2004). McEnteggart argues that the past has become more and more part of contemporary cinematic depictions since '9/11', saying that superhero films need to be both a diversion and a display of '9/11' as historical event. Intentionally or not, superhero films establish the sequel-like nature that should then also apply to the 'War on Terror' (McEnteggart, 2010). At the same time, they offer a short-term resolution to the conflict at hand. Since audiences are used to the continuity of superhero narratives (in the sense that the heroic battle against evil is perpetual) the missing historical contextualisation and reflection are hardly noticed. The fact that we do talk about it as a day on which everything changed and the 'post-'9/11' period' somewhat implies the relationship between history and event but this is not being followed through (Hassler-Forest, 2012). However, the superhero genre did become an important inter-text against the backdrop of a nation searching for meaning in heroism and sacrifice.

## Superheroes and the Bush presidency

'9/11' quite obviously changed George W Bush's presidency (Kraus, 2004), since he had assumed the presidency with little interest or experience in foreign policy (J. P. Burke, 2004; Mann, 2004). By 2004 he could, without self-irony, describe himself as a 'war president':

I'm a war president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign-policy matters with war on my mind. Again, I wish it wasn't true, but it is true. And the American people need to know they got a president who sees the world the way it is. And I see dangers that exist, and it's important for us to deal with them (2004)

One might argue that at least for his first term he tried to preserve the image of "heroic presidential leadership" (Roper, 2004, p. 132). As much as '9/11' became an event outside of history in its alleged uniqueness, or in crude attempts to compare it to struggles of the past, Bush tried to position himself in succession to other 'heroic' presidents as well as equating himself with the firefighting 'heroes' of '9/11' (Spigel, 2004).

The German political magazine *Der Spiegel* had already provocatively reflected upon the jingoistic and self-heroicising words and actions of the President and his foreign policy team. In February 2002, they portrayed Bush as Rambo and other members of his cabinet as (super)heroic characters which, intended as a mockery of US foreign policy, was not received as such at the White House. Vice President Richard 'Dick' Cheney was represented as The Terminator, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice as Xena Warrior Princess, Secretary of State Colin Powell as Batman and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as Conan the Barbarian, basically "casting each national security player in the role of zealous destroyers from American popular culture" (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, p. 43). But contrary to the expected reaction, the White House ordered thirty-three poster-sized copies and expressed flattery, rather than feeling offence (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003). As Hassler-Forest argues, if this representation of US foreign policy "is an exaggeration of the way American neoliberal politicians have tended to present themselves on the global stage, it is only a slight one. The notion of the United States as a heroic and benevolent 'world police' has intensified incrementally from the 1980s onward" (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 1).

At the same time, '9/11' became an event to celebrate heroism as a team effort, including police and firefighters at first but eventually encompassing everyone belonging to the American creed (this is not to say that this process was at all unproblematic). This 'hero turn' in late 2001 played out in a variety of ways but was, among others, carried by visual and comic book representations. This is epitomised by comic books such as *Heroes: The World's Greatest Super Hero Creators Honor The World's Greatest Heroes 9-11-2001* published by Marvel or *9/11: September 11th, 2001* published by DC Comics that featured short stories by comic book creators such as Stan Lee, Alan Moore, and Neil Gaiman.

While popular culture seems to be perfect to narrate a cultural event such as '9/11', superheroic texts quickly adapted to a successful mixture of proximity to the event while avoiding any direct reference. For example, regarding the film *Spider-Man* (2002), Koh argues, "Marvel Comics minimized any references to contemporary happenings not only in the real world but also from the broader Spider-Man franchise. Instead, the movie retells Spider-Man's origin story from 1964, and has him adventure in a temporally confused chronotope" (Koh, 2009, p. 735).

The first post-'9/11' superhero film, *Spider-Man* was produced and filmed before '9/11' in January to June 2001 but was not released until 9 months after the attacks on New York and Washington. Sony retracted as inappropriate the initial posters for the first film in Director Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy because they showed the Twin Towers reflected in Spider-Man's eyes. They also withdrew a teaser trailer that featured how Spider-Man catches some robbers in a huge net spun between the Twin Towers (Pollard, 2011). For Terence McSweeney, this removal "proved to be the opening shot in a protracted cultural battleground that continued throughout the post-9/11 decade and beyond. [...] 9/11 was paradoxically both erased from the cinema screens and returned to in film after film" (2014, p. 2). This is not to say that the 'War on Terror' did not feature on the big screen. Films such as *World Trade Center* (2006), *United 93* (2006), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) engaged with different aspects of '9/11' itself or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but films that directly depict military conflict were negotiated and perceived differently. The success of superhero films as discursive material rather stems from the interplay between alleged escapism and confrontation.

Even though it was only *Spider-Man*'s release and not its main production that coincided with the immediate post-'9/11' period it was nonetheless consumed through the lens of the 'War on Terror'. As Jeffrey Brown points out, "The endlessly repeated scenes in superhero movies that suggest or re-enact the horrors of 9/11 allow a safely contained and controlled fictionalization of the attacks, and works to excise persistent social fears" (2017, p. 12). The film itself sets a crucial milestone for superhero films in the years after. *Spider-Man*, as well as the final part of Raimi's trilogy *Spider-Man 3* in 2007, were the domestic top-grossing films in their respective years while *Spider-Man 2* was second highest in 2004, all were kicking off the surge of the genre. At the same time, *Spider-Man* was right on time in creating the narrative of trauma, resurrection and heroism against the backdrop of tropes surrounding superhero comics and films that had been ingrained into the national identity of the US over the course of decades. The character of Spider-Man remains one of the most popular and famous ones within the Marvel Universe when it comes not only to relatively stable audiences for the films but also comic books, merchandise, video games, musical productions, etc (Weiner & Peaslee, 2012). The long tradition of the character and his versatility means that he "probably would be recognized anywhere in the world regardless of differences in race, language, creed or any other grouping, and whether or not

the individuals had read a story, seen a movie, watched a television program or played a video game related to him (Weiner, 2009, p. 458).

The origin story of the hero helps to ground the character within a broader social environment. As the superheroic texts are set in a time that is dehistoricised, the origin story becomes ever more important. Most films of this early phase pre-2009 engage with origin stories, drawing on the original comic book material. In the *Spider-Man* trilogy the main character, Peter Parker, goes through a variety of personal identity crises, always coupled with the experience of the death of his surrogate father, Uncle Ben. Peter's traumatic and anxious experiences get heightened when Ben is murdered, with Peter blaming himself. Peter realises later on that he could have prevented his uncle's murder which reinforces his guilt. Through the death of his surrogate father, the mourning and the feeling of guilt, Peter's superhero other, Spider-Man, is being shaped through the advice uncle Ben was giving him: "With great power comes great responsibility." To redeem himself from his guilt, Spider-Man sets out to clean the city of crime, while Ben's mantra echoes around him. Audiences watching the film on its release in May 2002 could easily have drawn parallels with the tumultuous recent events in New York, Peter Parker's home city, and the redemptive wars taking place in Afghanistan and later Iraq, even though the makers of the film would have known nothing of the context within which the film would be watched when the majority of the writing and filming took place.

The first and the last shot of the film, furthermore, feature the US flag, setting the plot of the film and its sequels firmly into an exclusively American space. This is a depiction that is repeated in other films, namely the division between peaceful rural/suburban space and the urban spaces as battlegrounds/frontlines with clearly gendered undertones. Superman is heavily connected to Kansas but fights in Metropolis, Batman resides in Wayne Manor but fights crime in Gotham, and Spider-Man seeks out the New York suburbs before returning to the city to fight. This rural/suburban/city split also has a gendered dimension as it is often underlined by featuring female characters. Superman returns home to his mother, Spider-Man has Aunt May, and Batman's character is underlined by the absence of parental figures at home with his butler Alfred as a surrogate parent. Yet again, both the urban and the rural display important features of American conceptualisations of battle on the one hand and (conservative) values on the other.

In *Spider-Man*, the first battle between Spider-Man's nemesis, Green Goblin, and Spider-Man takes place on Times Square during a colourful parade, selecting the urban space as the spectacular scenery for battle. The battle at Times Square can therefore also be seen as the establishment of Spider-Man as the hero and Green Goblin as the villain. Both were genetically transformed but chose different paths:



Green Goblin: But the one thing they love more than a hero is to see a hero fail, fall, die trying. In spite of everything you've done for them, eventually, they will hate you. Why bother?

Spider-Man: Because it's right.

Not only does Spider-Man resist the (admittedly weak) attempts of seduction from the evil side – his first test – but interestingly he answers Green Goblin's relatively complex question with a tautology: If something is the right thing to do, it apparently does not need any further explanation or legitimisation. Spider-Man declines another offer later in the film to team up with Green Goblin, a move that is expected by the audience familiar with the character, however still underlying a crucial point, namely that despite personal histories, good and evil are ultimately displayed as choice. Mondello's analysis of the comic books can also be extended to other superheroes and to the films: "With each battle between Spider-Man and one of his tormentors, we enter the realm of high adventure, knowing full well that the hero's victory will only be temporary, for the villain will return time and again to haunt and pursue him" (1976, p. 233).

As much as the films focus on the individual as a hero, there is a visible and reiterated link to connect the heroic figure to the people. The final battle in *Spider-Man* begins with another choice, with Brooklyn Bridge as highly symbolic venue. After Green Goblin has kidnapped Spider-Man's love interest, Mary Jane, and hijacked a school bus, he presents the hero with the choice of saving only one of them. Spider-Man does manage to save both but not without the help of the American citizens who distract Green Goblin. "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us" shouted by one of the citizens illustrates not only the unity of the people against the common threat but furthermore suggests the total support of the vigilante by the people. Significantly, this scene was filmed and added *after* the September 11 attacks and serves not only to connect the US flag with the American population but echoes Bush's rhetoric: "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001a).

At the end of the film, after the villain has been destroyed and Peter's love interest has been rescued, he reiterates his mantra, embracing the development he made throughout the film: "Whatever life holds in store for me I will never forget these words 'with great power comes great responsibility.' This is my gift. My curse. Who am I? I'm Spider-Man." The 'great responsibility' quote, attributed to and repeated by various luminaries, from Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt to Winston Churchill, gives the plot an historical context, situating it within the struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but without that context becoming concrete. Additionally, it addresses the historical role the US has occupied since at least World War II and was challenged by the '9/11' attacks, namely the role as a global superpower with questions of responsibility and, to some extent, guilt and choice. At the same time, the mantra demonstrates the nostalgia that surrounds the whole film. Multiple features of the film express the

attempt by the director to draw together the scenery of the original comic book setting and modern, early 2000s impressions of New York. The well-known costume of Spider-Man as well as the spider bite that initiates Peter Parker's transformation to a superhero underline an "extensive, non-ironic provision of 'access points' for repisodic nostalgia across generations" (Koh, 2009, p. 739).

Again, *Spider-Man* did not address '9/11' per se as it was mostly produced before the event – indeed images of the Twin Towers in some scenes were digitally removed in post-production – but even so, it was read and consumed against the backdrop of the trauma, the Afghanistan war and the broader narrative of the 'War on Terror'. Even years later the film would get reviews that argued it displayed exactly what America needed to heal (Chang, 2016; Milzarski, 2018). *Spider-Man 2* (2004) more explicitly addresses the trauma including the villain Dr Octavius who illustrates what damage can be done if technology goes wrong. Jeanne Holland analyses the film as the first Hollywood blockbuster that clearly reacts to the events of September 11, 2001. It is "[j]ustifying America's inattention and unpreparedness on 9/11 is the core of the film's conservative, therapeutic narrative" (2012, p. 295). The internal conflicts of Peter Parker and the ambivalences he experiences seem indeed connected to post-'9/11' discourses. But rather than mere unpreparedness, it is a reconsideration of what it essentially means to be a superhero which seems to torment Peter throughout the film. It is his Aunt May in this film who convinces him in the end not to give up on the superheroic life:

Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them. Cheer them. Scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us that keeps us honest gives us strength makes us noble and finally allows us to die with pride. Even though sometimes we have to be steady and give up the thing we want the most. Even our dreams.

The temporal reference to past acts of heroism remains unspoken but the link to '9/11' seems obvious, if dehistoricised again. Underscored by other Marvel productions such as *Daredevil* (2003), *X2* (2003), *Hulk* (2003), and DC's *Catwoman* (2004), *Spider-Man 2* could react not only to the '9/11' attacks but furthermore already incorporate the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. It re-formulates conceptions of heroism and debates at length what happens when heroes have an identity crisis. As much as the US had to re-invent priorities in its security and foreign policies, Bush and others formulated them against the backdrop of a global 'War on Terror' that has "no room for ambiguity, and even if enemies are not working together in league, they will be regarded as part of the same obstacle to Washington's will" (Dunn, 2003, p. 782). Thus, even if villains get a platform that shows them in a more differentiated light, in the end the hero (as stand-in for American identities and beliefs) draws the line when it comes to ultimately doing the right thing. Dr Octavius might sacrifice himself at the end of *Spider-Man 2* but he is merely correcting what was his own destructive ambition in the first place, and only initiated by Spider-Man's intervention.

The films of the Bush era were rebooting a variety of characters' traumatic origins. In their character development, they also focus on the experience of trauma. In *Spider-Man* (2002), *Daredevil* (2003), *Hulk* (2003), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and *Iron Man* (2008) the main characters experience accidents that have an influence on their identity, physically and psychologically. They also have a traumatic effect, often accompanied by the experience of loss of paternal figures, most prominently in *Spider-Man* and *Daredevil* as well as *Elektra* (2005), *Hellboy* (2005), *Batman Begins* (2005), or loss of her own life in *Catwoman* (2004). The traumatic loss of life (displayed as the result of an accident) drives the superheroes to a loss of a sense of self and ultimately into crisis.

The focus for these films lies on the individual hero. Apart from films featuring the Fantastic Four or the X-Men, which are the exceptions in this period, most films feature individual stories or origins. The team narratives developed in the comic books as early as the 1960s would not come to the main Marvel Cinematic Universe nor the DC Expanded Universe until later with the Avengers and Justice League respectively. Protecting the homeland is at the forefront of the films at this point. The superheroes we see at this period struggle with their own environment, not yet ready to step out into the world and join a team to protect the globe or indeed the whole galaxy.

The filmic representations, furthermore, focus on the corporeal dimension and the existence as superheroic figure as one of extreme physical experience. In the case of *The Fantastic Four* (2005) or the Hulk films (2003, 2008) as well as *Spider-Man*, the origin story is tied to the actual, accidental change of DNA which causes the development of superpowers. But an even greater visual connection to '9/11', without explicit reference, is the role of the movement of bodies, especially of the superheroic bodies. Echoing the falling bodies of people who jumped off the burning World Trade Center, it is one of many superhero traits that they ascend and descend through the air. Remarkably, in *Superman Returns* (2006) and *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Superman and Hulk lose consciousness when they are high up and fall lifeless towards the ground. *Spider-Man* exaggerates this point as his movement through the skyline of New York consists of constant falling and lifting himself up again. In a Judeo-Christian reading, this could furthermore be interpreted as the fall of the saviour before his resurrection. Again, *Superman Returns* and *Spider-Man* feature the hero in a pose similar to Jesus on the cross. While Superman is falling to the ground, Spider-Man is lifted by the people of New York he has just saved, arms stretched out wide. Both heroes feature a wound on their side, underscoring the blatant saviour iconography. As Debrix analyses regarding falling bodies: "resilience, courage, compassion, and collective moral uplifting in the face of terror, all centered around the sight of the body that falls but, sometimes, is propped up thanks to fellow human beings" (2016, p. 178). Again, in the case of *Spider-Man*, the connection between the people and their saviour is foregrounded, not coincidentally preventing a disaster in the same city as the terror attacks which provides the city tableau for many of the Marvel

Cinematic Universe's epic battles. Ben Saunders in his Judaeo-Christian reading of superheroes argues that central features of Peter Parker's psychology are made of traumatic loss, guilt, and compensatory reaction "from the outset of his career as a costumed adventurer, and his self-image is profoundly marked by the experience. [H]e is more given to expressions of depressive self-loathing than any other superhero" (B. Saunders, 2011, p. 74)

The portrayal of the origin story can then be seen as both an expression of extreme crisis and as an attempt to create a paradoxical dehistoricised continuity. *Superman Returns* is an exception here as it vaguely draws on the Superman films from the 1980s and the depicted origin story there without developing a new one in its 2006 version. As the return rather than the origin story is at the centre of the film this establishes a before and an after and opens the question of why Superman (in his allegorical function as protector) was gone in the first place. The relationship between the male protector and the feminised city of Metropolis (personified by Lois Lane) is at the centre of the film, addressing how the city suffered from being unprotected for the past 5 years (which brings us back to the year 2001). The depiction is quite clear, namely that there was a good 'before' everything went bad. In a pivotal dialogue in the middle of the film, Lois confronts Superman with the issue: "How could you leave us like that? I moved on. So did the rest of us. That's why I wrote it: 'The world doesn't need a savior'. And neither do I." Superman answers: "You wrote that the world doesn't need a savior but every day I hear people crying for one. I'm sorry I left you, Lois." The figure of a saviour that protects from danger is evoked over and over again during the film, expressing shame and guilt over a hinted trauma that happened. At the same time, the gendered nature of the scene establishes the ability to protect as a male virtue whereas the loss of said protection (the trauma) is equated more with the loss of masculine protection than with any deeper reflection on specific reasons (Faludi, 2007).

When Superman's role as protector is re-established, this happens with the help of the American people. In a few shots, Metropolis is clearly transformed into New York/Manhattan, making the link between the traumatic themes of the film and the *real* site of the trauma even more explicit. Ultimately, when Superman saves the city and is falling back to the ground like a fallen saviour and crashing into a space resembling Central Park, police and medical doctors, invoking the dual heroism of everyday heroes and a single, messianic hero, are rescuing him. But even more so, Superman is allowed to return as protector, stronger than ever and underlined by patriarchal lineage. While Superman himself, heavily wounded after a battle with his nemesis Lex Luthor, gets resurrected by the voice of his father, he himself gives advice to his sleeping son at the end of the film, continuing Judaeo-Christian notions of God as the father and Jesus as the son. Superman has Lois convinced at the end that despite the catastrophic development of the past years, he will now be back to function as messianic protector again. At the beginning, we can see how Lois has published a Pulitzer Prize-winning article titled "Why

the world doesn't need Superman"; at the end of the film this has changed to Lois publishing an article titled "Why the world needs Superman." Ultimately, the film perpetuates vague notions of paternal protection while the protagonist is constantly confronted with trauma, guilt, and shame. What is furthermore suggested is paternal succession; the voice of Superman's father from the Superman films of the 1980s is one factor, the last conversation of the film, namely Superman's monologue towards his sleeping son, illustrate this. This furthermore creates the illusion of continuity in a highly ambiguous way, not least since none of the recurring characters looks 20 years older than they did in 1987's *Superman IV*.

To some extent, *Batman Begins* plays into the same narrative. Bruce Wayne's (if passive) involvement in his parents' murder as well as his traumatic experience triggered by bats surround the hero from the very beginning. While in the course of the film, Batman prevents a train from crashing into Wayne Tower, a massive building in the centre of Gotham, Superman prevents a plane from crashing into a football stadium in *Superman Returns* while Spider-Man in *Spider-Man 2* also just about manages to stop a train. What these scenes remarkably underline is that the battle against the villains does not only consist of saving or protecting people but, furthermore, infrastructure. The plane almost crashing into a baseball stadium leaves little room for interpretation that this plays on the destruction of symbols of American identity through the (mis)use of an everyday passenger aircraft. *Batman Begins* does feature a ground zero space at the end of the film as Wayne mansion, Bruce's home, has been destroyed but rather than taking this as a moment of consternation, this is seen as a new beginning; rather than defeat, horrible destruction means to come back stronger. Before Wayne mansion is destroyed, Bruce has a lengthy conversation with villain Ra's al Ghul, a character that, for the first part of the film, is displayed as a bin Laden-like character, as screenplay writer David S. Goyer confirms: "We modelled him after Osama bin Laden. He's not crazy in the way that all the other Batman villains are. He's not bent on revenge; he's actually trying to heal the world. He's just doing it by very draconian means" (quoted in T. Ryan, 2005). Indeed, Ra's al Ghul employs an anti-imperial critique of Gotham, accusing it of having become decadent and thus contributed to its own downfall. In a lengthy dialogue before the final part of the film, Ra's al Ghul suggests:

We sacked Rome. Loaded trade ships with plague rats. Burned London to the ground. Every time a civilization reaches the pinnacle of its decadence, we return to restore the balance. Gotham isn't beyond saving [...] No one can save Gotham. When a forest grows too wild, a purging fire is inevitable and natural. Tomorrow the world will watch in horror as its greatest city destroys itself. The movement back to harmony will be unstoppable this time [...] And this time no misguided idealists will get in the way. Like your father, you lack the courage to do all that is necessary. If someone stands in the way of true justice you simply walk up behind them and stab them in the heart.

This statement invokes a lot of different themes that are on the one hand part of a bigger discourse that positions terrorism and terrorist violence as anti-imperial or anti-globalist (Baudrillard, 2003). On the other hand, the film allows for the formulation of critique that might seem provocative and directed against America but ultimately is not. Hollywood does not shy away from allowing seemingly provocative points made in their films as long as they remain flawed and are eventually rejected while uncritically retaining a mythological concept of American exceptionalism (Alford, 2010; McCrisken & Pepper, 2005). In this case, the villain articulates points that might sound plausible at first but quickly turn hollow and overly aggressive. As Ra's al Ghul's notion of justice is built on unnecessary violence (reflecting the violence of the '9/11' attacks) Batman's approach to violence is throughout the whole film series built on notions of prudence and caution. He saves Ra's al Ghul from a fire shortly after, showing that he is a better man than the villain while at the end of the film when he could save him a second time he refuses and Ra's al Ghul dies. Symbolically relevant, the final battle takes place on a train that is about to crash into Wayne Tower, the biggest building in Gotham. By stopping the train from crashing into the building and by having the bad guy killed at the same time the fantasy of a pre-'9/11' world is restored. It remains an ironic flaw that Batman's only response to anti-imperial critique is violence leading to the death of the security threat.

While the superhero genre at this point, up to 2008, still had its biggest successes ahead of it we can already see how the films reacted to, picked up, and narrated their own version of the 'War on Terror'. The paradoxical situation here is that these films are coding specific elements within terrorism discourses and make them more fantastical while they are still clearly read and conceived against the backdrop of *real* political and highly violent issues. Hassler-Forest's analysis of the films mentioned above is that "the obligation to fight a Sisyphean War on Terror is motivated primarily by this sense of trauma, which, like the representations of the 9/11 attacks, is revisited endlessly as a familiar but fundamentally ungraspable moment of historical rupture" (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 99). What these earlier films managed well is to become adaptable to a new era of US foreign policy. This is not to say that the strategies, logics, or policies necessarily changed but that '9/11' felt different for Americans and, as an extension, for the rest of the world. The trauma and crisis which started out as a cultural experience, manifested itself as a political one, trapped between the omnipresent and timeless exceptionalist project that is the US and the shift from ahistorical crisis to infinite war, more or less precisely outlined by George W. Bush as the 'War on Terror'.

*Spider-Man* and other superhero films tapped into a field that seemed ideal to combine older tropes of Cold War security concepts with new security issues that were just about to form and solidify. Together with the X-Men, Superman, and Batman, the Spider-Man films built the core of the renewed superhero genre which was later drastically expanded. The individual trauma and an experience of loss, a

messianic saviour figure and its strong tie to the US American people, traditional notions of good and evil, the importance of choice, and the focus on spatial divisions between the urban and the rural have always been part of the comic book texts and were fitting well into the bloc confrontation of the Cold War. But now they seemed an ideal fit to underpin the new challenges of the post-‘9/11’ era. This also includes specific elements mentioned above and additional focus on the origin story of the character and a very vague historical positioning of the plot. The dehistoricised dimension of the film *Spider-Man*, however, was rather supporting the film’s success and helped embed it into post-‘9/11’ discourses even though it was produced before the events. As paradoxical as it sounds, the film was already read as a textual reaction to ‘9/11’ and the Afghanistan war as audiences were consuming it from the perspective of the post-‘9/11’ world. To further stress this point, they could not watch it from any other perspective but one of fresh memories of the attacks. This also indicates that the film started to unfold their co-production of the ‘War on Terror’ immediately and without delay.

While the genre still had its biggest successes ahead, the films made during the Bush years already explored the potential of later productions, and tapped into traditional views, angles and tropes presented in decades if not centuries of US Foreign Policy and in their messianic contours they seemed to fit George W. Bush’s eschatological rhetoric embedded in dichotomous constructions of good vs. evil, saviour vs. devil and liberty vs. tyranny. Who else would be better prepared to fill the messianic role of the world’s saviour than the ones who had done so over and over again over the course of 60 years or more? This is not to assume any correlation as Brown points out: “The genre may have flourished anyway, but the events of September 11 bolstered a cultural need for superheroes and provided the films with a common narrative theme of defending the nation from massive attacks” (2017, p. 63). By the end of the Bush era, the plans to expand the genre had moved forward especially on the side of Warner Brothers and Marvel. While *Spider-Man*, *Superman*, *Batman* and a variety of others made their comeback at the cinema, tapping into crucial themes of the early ‘War on Terror’ they formed a different vision towards the end of Bush’s presidency.

### Superheroes as counter-narratives

This section shows how the superhero genre found a new purpose in the debate around Bush’s presidency, producing films that could be read as affirmation and critique alike. At the same time, they anticipate the occurrence of a new form of leadership that should arrive with Barack Obama and his promise to do things differently from now on.

The superhero films leading up to 2008 and the election campaign could be implicitly read against the backdrop of the developing security regime. As much as the Bush presidency lost a lot of its post-‘9/11’ approval rating among the population as the Iraq war unfolded and, even more so, around the globe,

the superhero genre established itself as a continuous companion and producer of new foreign policy discourses. Liberal commentator Frank Rich, reviewing *Spider-Man 2*, argues that the film accurately read the “national pulse” and, developing this further, that the film was “an escapist movie that serves as a rebuke to what its audience wants to escape from: a pop culture that is often too shrill and an election-year political culture that increasingly mimics that pop culture” (Rich, 2004). While the intensity of election campaigns and the very short political cycle (presidential every four years with mid-terms in between) surely can take its toll, *Spider-Man 2* is hardly escapist. On the contrary, the whole Spider-Man trilogy describes very well how America was developing during the early ‘War on Terror’ including multiple identity crises and questioning of their own purpose. But Rich’s comment remains interesting because it insinuates that these co-constituting elements were not present throughout the film. George W. Bush’s former speechwriter David Frum compared *Spider-Man 2* and Michael Moore’s overtly political, polemical documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* and comes to the conclusion that while the latter is directly critical of the Bush administration, Spider-Man is an allegory for the president, as he “is regularly belittled and ridiculed by almost everyone who knows him. Fashionable society despises him; the press lampoons and attacks him” but ultimately he “will soon return for another term” (Frum, 2004).

The interesting point here is that both reviews might differ in their politics and their position in the political spectrum, but ultimately appreciate *Spider-Man 2* as a crucial national signifier at a time when the war campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan were throwing a wrench into the government’s plans to achieve a quick and decisive victory in the ‘war on terror’. Al Qaeda was still undefeated, and Osama bin Laden remained out of sight of US attempts to catch or kill him. *Spider-Man 2* as second highest-grossing film in the US and third highest-grossing film internationally in 2004 encapsulates the point Rich aims to make here, namely that within the permanent, high-alert climate within the US (and increasingly the rest of the world) it would need more fantastical, abstract and coded visual narratives to express the seriousness of the situation without getting lost in the grim material and ideological realities of the ‘War on Terror’. *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins* were also seen against the backdrop of ‘9/11’ discourses (Dvorsky, 2006; Kaufman, 2009; Simonpillai, 2013). What is interesting here is the overly allegorical reading of the films that occurs at times. This is to say that “they do illustrate the strong general tendency to interpret the film as a topical text that reflects contemporary political and ideological choices and dilemmas, rather than a fantastical alternate universe without any bearing on a perceived form of ‘reality’” (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 146).

The appeal to liberal and conservative audiences became an important feature of the revived superhero genre. This is not to say that this was not the case in earlier superheroic comics or texts but the way they fitted into the political landscape of the early ‘War on Terror’ and the Bush presidency means that



they could be read early on as an overarching American text. The *Spider-Man* trilogy, while popular and successful abroad as well, worked especially well inside the US. However, the summer blockbusters of 2008 with *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* opened a new commercial and political chapter for the genre. Both films were top of the annual American box office while *The Dark Knight* also topped the annual box office worldwide (with *Iron Man* being 8<sup>th</sup>). Additionally, they were released only months apart from each other, in May and July 2008, ushering in an electoral campaign period in which the desire for new leadership and new directions in the 'War on Terror' prevailed, personified by Barack Obama. Both films were also part of a bigger continuity within the DC and Marvel universes, outlining the continuous nature of the filmic texts. Rather than relying on stand-alone productions, the superhero genre would go in an elaborate direction, producing texts that were increasingly connected to each other.

*Iron Man* features the origin story of a character first portrayed in the comic books in March 1963. The film basically adopts the origin story from 1963 with a few minor changes that relate to the War on Terror instead of the Cold War. Tony Stark is an arms producer frequently contracting with the US army. His ideological base is quickly explained when he gives a presentation of a new arms system in Afghanistan:

They say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how Dad did it. That's how America does it. And it's worked out pretty well so far. Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain, and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won't even want to come out of their caves.

The rhetoric employed here has multiple functions. The bad guys in the cave are a very simplified reference to the cave complex Tora Bora and Osama bin Laden in hiding. Furthermore, Stark's rhetoric evokes George W. Bush's words on September 11, 2001, when he stated that "freedom, itself, was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended" and that "The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts" (Bush, 2001d). The Vietnamese communists of the original comic book have merely been replaced by Afghan terrorists. Given the specific framing of the first half of the film, *Iron Man* is, according to Tanner Mirrlees, an example of how "popular film is not 'just entertainment' that circulates in apolitical theatre markets, but is linked to and supportive of the geopolitical-economy and ideology of the U.S. Empire" (Mirrlees, 2013, p. 5). After Stark gets captured by the terrorists, he manages to escape by building a prototype Iron Man suit but the experience makes him reconsider his words and his ideological position since he finds that they are using his captured Stark Industry weapons. His plan to give up his profession as an arms dealer could superficially be read as a turn to a more responsible understanding of military power and the epiphany that selling arms arbitrarily all over the world could, eventually, also threaten the US. This can then also be read as a critique of previous US foreign policy towards the Middle East and the notion that the

support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980s and the abandonment afterwards helped the creation of American nightmares such as the threat of al Qaeda.

After his transformation into Iron Man, he becomes an expression of American interventionism; in a pivotal scene, he flies off to the fictional Afghan town of Gulmira to prevent a group of terrorists from oppressing and potentially killing civilians. Iron Man is capable of taking out the bad guys by identifying them through his helmet's threat recognition technology, virtually marking them as targets while the civilians are recognised as harmless. After killing all terrorists but one, he leaves the leader of the terrorist group (sharing similarities with Saddam Hussein) to the civilians to take care of. He then flies off and destroys the Jericho missiles (produced by Stark Industries), yet another blatant reference to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

What is crucial about the film, peaking in a final battle against the villain Iron Monger, is the shift from the use of conventional weaponry to clean or surgical war. Iron Man possesses the military technology, showcased on multiple occasions, to conduct precise strikes. This is not only a reflection and, eventually, a rejection of Bush's foreign policy which was seen as increasingly messy and tainted by multiple botched or controversial wars, conflicts and interventions, but furthermore anticipates the move from said messiness to a cleaner and more surgical notion of how the 'War on Terror' should be fought, coming to fruition under Obama and his expansion of drone warfare (McCracken, 2013). The film was also supported by the Pentagon to the extent that the Air Force website proudly documented when Iron Man actor Robert Downey Jr. and director Jon Favreau visited Edwards Air Force Base (O'Brien, 2009). Not surprisingly, while Iron Man can be read as an undermining actor to the state, he still very much promotes American military and technological prowess but portrayed as surgical and rational. That is to say that Iron Man as well as other vigilante characters in the comic books or films reveal an understanding of individualism and state-scepticism that can be found in wide areas of American identity. At the same time, they promote and are very much connected to military institutions, military personnel and, ultimately, military interests. In this sense, they produce a vision of (American) security and foreign policy that is connected to military prowess and force.

With *The Dark Knight* building on *Batman Begins*, we can see an intensification of the representation of security issues and the positioning of the hero as an increasingly ambiguous figure. Not unlike *Iron Man*, the film is concerned with questions of security and surveillance to the degree that gazing and watching become key features. Surveillance and CCTV had already become an issue under Bush and the film addresses this issue from the perspective of the emergency state. Batman aims to use the so-called sonar system, surveilling all citizens of Gotham, in order to find the Joker. His engineer, Lucius Fox, warns him not to use it, calling the system unethical. But Batman justifies the usage by referring to

the exceptional nature of the situation. While this is clearly a reference to Bush's emergency politics, it also weirdly anticipates Obama's later NSA and Prism scandals and questions of legality, legitimacy and ethics evolving from it.

The Joker as the main antagonist of Batman can easily be read against the backdrop of terror. While terrorists as such do not feature in the film, the Joker appears as constant creator of chaos and a reminder of the unpredictable terrorist threat to normal everyday life in America. Alfred Pennyworth's description of the Joker should remind us how we are supposed to regard terrorists: "Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just wanna watch the world burn." Obviously, the Joker is a more complex character rather than a mere stand-in for terroristic violence; for example, by setting a pile of money on fire he demonstrates the rejection of capitalistic forms of economic and social reproduction that Bruce Wayne is complicit in, an aspect that might make him seem even likeable to some members of the audience. The function he plays is later similarly occupied by the villain Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*; both refuse to participate in a system that in neo-liberal times is so known and anxiously dreaded by large parts of the audience. In this sense the villains might even offer some space for cathartic fantasies of breaking out of the contemporary economic and social system. But the film still does not escape the logic, very much aligned with *Iron Man*, that there are bad people out there who create carnage for no apparent reason and that understanding their reasons is not even relevant. The juxtaposition between the Joker on the one hand and the other bad guys in the film, organised Mafiosi, exaggerates the role of the villain; while the crooks are engaging in more or less rational legal or illegal transactions, the Joker does not.

This makes *The Dark Knight* an almost perfect 'War on Terror' film. In the late stages of the Bush presidency, the established logics in the engagement with terrorism and the labelling of the very same had to remain unambiguous. That some men just wanted to watch the world burn and therefore cannot be negotiated with echoes the long-time slogan that the US would not negotiate with terrorists. This plays into a discourse of legitimacy and legitimate use of force within US foreign policy, creating a hierarchy between those actors deserving of communicative attention and those that are positioned outside of the possibility to be reasoned with (Toros, 2008). A lot of effort then goes into culturally and symbolically creating this hierarchy, making this a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation. The attempt to analyse the terroristic threat in order to understand where it comes from seems to undermine the attempt to reduce moral ambiguity. As Zulaika and Douglass argue, not only are all discourses on terrorism shrouded in an "inescapable complicity between fact and fiction" but political debates on terrorism rely on an "apocalyptic and absolutist framework within which terrorism discourse casts its characters and networks, i.e., its assumptions of all-encompassing discursive

coherence" (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 4). It is essential that the terrorist maintains an essence, encompassed by vague notions of evilness and violence, otherwise the terrorist might cease to exist and so would the 'War on Terror' or, even worse, '9/11'. The Joker and Batman are happily re-enacting a relationship they have already portrayed multiple times before in the comic books and previous films but what is heightened here is the paradoxical resolution of the film which points towards the inescapable symbioses between the two. In a scene in which Batman ends up torturing the Joker, the villain discursively traps the hero:

Batman: Then why do you wanna kill me?

Joker [laughs]: I don't wanna kill you. What would I do without you? [...] No, no, no. No, you...you complete me.

While these moments of self-reflection periodically appear in the films and the comic books, Joker's reasoning challenges the common sense understanding of the binary between good and evil; if one was reading the film against the backdrop of the 'War on Terror' this might even apply to the relationship between US foreign policy endeavours and terrorism itself. However, not surprisingly this point was yet again lost on some. Conservative pundit Andrew Klavan reflects on the film in the *Wall Street Journal* by directly comparing the heroic protagonist with George W. Bush. According to him, Bush had to "push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past." He goes on to criticise how in the alleged left-wing Hollywood world the good guys were indistinguishable from the bad ones while it had to be clear that "we must defend these values in a world that does not universally embrace them -- when we reach the place where we must be intolerant in order to defend tolerance, or unkind in order to defend kindness, or hateful in order to defend what we love" (Klavan, 2008). The Orwellian paradox of the argument aside, Klavan quite clearly sees the film as broadly supporting Bush's policy on foreign intervention, torture, Guantanamo Bay and counter-insurgency. By way of contrast, *Foreign Policy* author Travis Daub perceives the film as a rather critical reflection on the Bush presidency (Daub, 2008). As with other films before, the question is not what their true meaning is, but that *Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Policy* tried to directly tie the films to the politics of the time shows how these films were attentively observed. At the same time, as with the *Spider-Man* trilogy, both *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* could be interpreted and situated in either a liberal or a conservative light.

Ultimately, the remarkable aspect of both films is that they show philanthropic, elitest, white men, using military gadgets and their riches to pursue American national interest against the backdrop of fending off terroristic threats, more or less clearly coded. The elegance and popularity that both characters incorporate and display, however, also reveal something else. The time for the messiness of how the 'War on Terror' was supposed to be conducted was over. Obama ran with the promise of

changes in rhetoric and policy. As much as Iron Man and Batman aim to pursue their fight against evil with a cleaner and more humane form of technology and ideology, the US was ready for a new form of leadership breaking with the disappointments of the second Bush term. In this sense, both films anticipate Obama and usher in a new period within US foreign policy. However, as much as the superhero films try to create a form of historical consistency through their focus on origins and development from there, they ultimately remain dehistoricised in the way they address threat and the use of violence. Rather they depict evil as an unfortunate but necessary feature of political life while trying to retain a sense of violence as a positive and unavoidable form of conflict resolution. Fitting to Obama's campaign, Canavan analyses a link between the character of the Joker and Obama himself, as they both promise "a projected desire for a revolutionary reconfiguration of the conditions of life" (2010, p. 3). But he also points out that Batman and the Joker as well as their relationship remains widely without history, which is also "similarly inescapable with regard to Barack Obama, who has managed to draw such a superfluity of history to himself that one hardly knows where to begin" (2010, p. 6). The issue of comic book characters being embedded in a sequential art form (Eisner, 2008) has long been known, that is to say that visual and narrative elements of the comic books work as sequence and comic book audiences are used to this specific form of culture. Additionally, the way that texts like Batman or Iron Man have been presented over years also means that audiences got used to sequel after sequel without any final resolution. The same then goes for the films, heroes and villains seem to easily be recycled and reused, killed off and brought back to life. While DC struggled more with the production of new texts apart from the Dark Knight trilogy 2005-2012, Marvel's *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* were already part of Phase 1 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, from now on insisting on a specific continuity within their story arcs and supported by the implementation of post-credits scenes after the main films, suggesting sequel after sequel. American (and to a second degree international) audiences got used to the fact that conflict, for America, was or had become endless and without limits. Post-credits scenes in films of the MCU all the way to (but not including) *Avengers: Endgame* and various other superhero films underline the sense of infinite and continuous conflict.

Bush and his administration had already suggested that *ending* the 'War on Terror' might be more difficult than starting it. Paralleling superhero narratives, even as so-called rogue regimes were overthrown or terrorists killed, the sequel was already always in production. Like the personification of evil and chaos, the Joker looks at Batman as well as the audience and teases them: "I think you and I are destined to do this forever." The dichotomous stratification of world politics and American foreign policy into good and evil has then already been established as inescapable navigation tool, leading into the Obama era. Not for the first time in American history, the battle between good and evil was established producing inescapable logics on how to act and how to fight, even though the construction

of good might actually lead to the construction of evil and vice versa (Baudrillard, 2003; Zulaika, 2012). The path into an infinite 'War on Terror' with infinite little sequels was in place. What had started as images of destroyed infrastructure and falling bodies had now become a full-blown cinematic spectacle.

By 2008 it became clear that the 'War on Terror' would continue beyond what had turned into a tumultuous presidency. Afghanistan and Iraq had developed into messy and costly affairs, Guantanamo Bay, illegal renditions of foreign citizens, the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the CIA use of torture put the US in a position of damaged international credibility and a seemingly ambiguous position towards human rights and democracy promotion. Additionally, the handling of Hurricane Katrina and the financial crisis left Bush vulnerable domestically, with his approval ratings dropping to 25% in late 2008. His second-term approval declined from 62% in his first term to only 37% on average (Gallup, 2009).

Barack Obama's rise has then to be seen against the alternative visions that Bush as well as Hillary Clinton, as his competitor in the Democratic primaries, and John McCain as Republican presidential candidate had to offer. He managed to create a convincing narrative of his campaign driven in part by highly distinguishable and conciliatory rhetoric that suggested, perhaps fantastically, that he would do things differently than Bush, making it an advantage that he could hardly be seen as an establishment figure at this point. In both *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*, the negotiation of how to fight the battle against evil plays a major role, drawing on moral questions of surveillance and ethical killings. *Iron Man* opens up multiple questions that would surround the debate about targeted killing and remote warfare during the Obama presidency. While the US had been struggling to maintain the appearance of legitimacy and benevolence in the international arena during the Bush era, Obama's campaign and his subsequent presidency were built on the explicit promise that things would be different now. The increased use of drones under Obama, intended to reduce the risk of the loss of American lives (Enemark, 2014) and as a turn away from Bush's 'War on Terror', was visually and narratively anticipated in *Iron Man*. The historical and political role of violence and assassination is broadly ignored. Even though parts of the film including the targeted killing scene take place in Afghanistan, political circumstances and the role of the US government remain vague, elusive, and illusive.

*New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott declared in a review of the film: "It is not quite the real world, but it's a bit closer than Gotham or Metropolis" (A. O. Scott, 2008). This comparison with other superhero films is interesting as it assumes different forms of *realism* in different films of the genre. But it also reveals how there indeed are certain, specific tropes and narratives found within *Iron Man* that could be clearly connected to the *real* world: questions of terrorism and security, the role of military technology and the first appearance of a character (not unlike Obama) who manages to give his

connections to political and military elites a human, relatable face. The possibility of targeted killing as a feasible way of dealing with a threat was impressively demonstrated.

In *The Dark Knight* the superhero does not reinvent himself but is rather confronted with the complex world of ethical and broadly unsolvable dilemmas (there is also the literal display of the Prisoner's Dilemma). The film can be discussed from different perspectives as it expresses a high degree of complexity and ambivalence. Will Brooker points out that the relationship between Batman and the Joker as the defining plot device serves the purpose to interrogate "the relationship between terrorist and counterterrorist" (Brooker, 2012, p. 186). While themes such as torture, extraordinary rendition, and universal surveillance are intensely negotiated in the film and can easily be seen as a strong critique of the Bush presidency, the film clearly also allows for conservative readings such as Klavan's, drawing lines between Bush and Batman: "And like W, Batman understands that there is no moral equivalence between a free society – in which people sometimes make the wrong choices – and a criminal sect bent on destruction. The former must be cherished even in its moments of folly; the latter must be hounded to the gates of Hell" (Klavan, 2008). This underlines what McSweeney analyses for the whole of the Dark Knight trilogy, namely that "they can persuasively be read as both an endorsement and a critique of the Bush administration's policies that are dramatized in the quasi-mythic tale of a conflicted superhero" (McSweeney, 2014, p. 125). However, the crucial point is that the films do negotiate a new form of self-reflection and self-understanding of their superheroic protagonists, crucially underpinning the desire to win the 'War on Terror' or at least to have it fought in new ways.

## Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to illustrate a new phase for both the cinematic superhero genre and US foreign policy through a massive shift in political and security concerns after the '9/11' attacks. In order to cope with the trauma resulting from the event, powerful narratives had to be created that were based on old and new mythological contemplations of how America should react to an existential threat. As I have argued, the interpretation of the event and the conclusions drawn from it were not clear or necessarily obvious but had to be established (Croft, 2006; R. Jackson, 2005). As already argued in chapter 2, American superheroes have been around almost every time American identity and, ultimately, its existence was up for grabs. In the case of the post-'9/11' period, they helped to co-constitute specific themes and narratives that contributed to the change in security and foreign policy. First, they usually have a traumatic origin story through which they develop their abilities to become superheroic. This complements the move of the Bush administration to quickly resort to alleged heroic tales as part of the American project. Second, through their long history, superheroes frequently rise again as easily identifiable and popular defenders of American society at a time when audiences are longing for a solution to an increasingly complex conflict. Third, through their fantastical appearance,

superhero films could fight evil and terror while being far enough removed from clear references to the dark realities of the 'War on Terror'.

Later films of the Bush era, however, started to illustrate the yearning for a way out of the frustrating stalemates that had stemmed from the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and offered a specific form of critique towards Bush's presidency without questioning the increasingly inescapable logics of the 'War on Terror'. Barack Obama as an almost superheroic, messianic figure was evoking ultimately highly fictitious and utopian notions of hope and change and personified the desire of the American public to win the war and to find cathartic resurrection. The deeply ingrained themes of evil and existential threat, however, made this impossible as even Obama would find out. Rather the 'War on Terror' – very much like the superhero genre itself – had become an ever more intense battlefield of infinite sequels. As much as superheroes do not find salvation, so the fall of the falling man is a "fall without impact [...] suggesting a circular trajectory whereby the memory of the event is retroactively produced as well as it is resuscitated by images" (Stubblefield, 2015, p. 59). The image that we are left with is that America will always (and maybe has always been) at war. There is no catharsis despite the bloody and violent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Engelhardt argues, the victory dividend felt most intensely after World War II has been replaced by a war dividend, underlining how the futile use of force has made the US a nation unmade by war (Engelhardt, 2018).



## Chapter 4 – Obama I and change

### Introduction

This chapter engages with the first presidential term of Barack Obama. Over three parts I will, first, show how a second wave of reboots especially by the MCU underpins Obama's attempt to move away from the way the 'War on Terror' was established during the Bush years, contemplatively and carefully trying to reshape the relationship between America and the rest of the world. Second, I will show how Obama's first term opens the way for a more multilateral understanding of foreign policy, while the MCU finds its preliminary finale with *The Avengers* (2012) establishing foreign policy and security as a team narrative. The insinuation is that under Obama, the different strands of America can come together and solve problems together. While the story remains relatively focused on the US, superhero films of the first Obama term also try to negotiate a positive relationship with the rest of the world. Third, despite the hopes for a better America, neither Obama nor the Avengers find a way out of the 'War on Terror', on the contrary, it seems like crises remain part of the American experience, while not even the assassination of Osama bin Laden can solve anything, neither politically nor symbolically. America does not seem to find a way to be how it *really* is.

### Reformed America

In this section, I engage with the ways that Obama's presidency was founded on the idea that US foreign and domestic policy needed to be, literally, changed. From his inauguration Obama's presidency was enshrined in a rejuvenated form of heroism, the idea of putting to rest the ghost of '9/11', to reconnect with disappointed allies, and to finally get the long-deserved peace.

In the week before Obama's inauguration in January 2009, Marvel Comics published a short story about it in *The Amazing Spider-Man #583* and put Obama on the front cover. In the story, the villain Chameleon tries to interrupt the inauguration ceremony, posing as Obama himself and locking the real Obama away. Spider-Man, of course, manages to save the day and the Secret Service can finally arrest Chameleon. Vice President Joe Biden and Obama's competitor in the 2008 election, John McCain, also feature in positive ways, offering a bipartisan interpretation of the text. Obama thanks Spider-Man by fist-bumping him, saying "thanks, partner". This paradigmatic story not only underlines Obama's heroic characterisation, himself being a great comic book fan, but furthermore shows American politicians and an American hero united against a shape-shifting villain.

Obama's election itself was built on a play with fantasies, with hope and change being his key catchphrases. Most importantly, the incoming Obama administration promised a reboot of the 'War on Terror', the aim of moving away from risky large-scale geopolitical adventures, a more reconciliatory rhetoric towards allies and a clearer strategy how to take out and kill the enemies of America to reboot

a foreign policy that had become lost under Bush, through torture, Guantanamo, and the Afghanistan and Iraq disasters. As if to confirm the specialness of this new era, *The Amazing Spider-Man #583* sold five times its usual number of copies (Last, 2009).

Iron Man had learned in 2008 what happens if the violence that one spreads causes blowback. His complacent and reckless behaviour enabled him to go through his own reckoning, only to come out stronger in a not very subtle post-'9/11' reference. In *Iron Man 2*, however, the first MCU film released during the Obama presidency, he has regained his strength and confidence. The contemplative but confident character draws on the transition from Bush to Obama while Thor and Captain America are two more embodiments of American identity whose origin stories come to the big screen in 2011. The cinematic development is buttressed by the comic book revamps of Marvel's *Marvel Now!* from 2012-2015 and DC's *The New 52* from 2011-2016. This was also done to attract new audiences but connects to the cinematic re-invention of the genre.

McSweeney reads the superhero genre of this period as "a new millennial frontier for American men to prove both their masculinity and their altruism" (McSweeney, 2018, p. 28). *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man* provide a specific narrative of their origin story, but one where the development of their main characters is added to in *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*. At the centre remains the question of controlling superheroic abilities. While Hulk struggles with the relationship between his rational self and his emotions (and continues to do so in the films to follow), Iron Man's masculinity is always tied to his persona as a philanthropist and playboy. However, the change he undergoes is the one from an unscrupulous arms dealer to a confident, militarised, but also measured American hero. This is underlined in *Iron Man 2* where the hero positions himself as one of the people. In a key scene at the beginning of the film, Tony Stark must justify himself in front of the Senate Armed Forces Committee regarding the question of whether as Iron Man he would preserve and act in the name of the American national interest. He is interrogated by a clearly biased Senator Stern, who later turns out to be an agent of Hydra, a para-military authoritarian organisation seeking world domination. While heroic music is playing, Stark explains on live television why rather than interrogating him, Stern and the political class should be grateful to him: "Because I am your nuclear deterrent. It's working, we're safe. America is secure. You want my property? You can't have it but I did you a big favour! I have successfully privatised world peace. What more do you want?" Seconds later he looks into the camera, surrounded by people giving him standing ovations: "My bond is with the people. And I will serve this great nation at the pleasure of myself. If there's one thing I've proven it's that you can count on me to pleasure myself." The innuendo at the end, again, is crucial to preserve his sexual identity while he, successfully, demonstrates that the political elite is corrupt and unwilling or unable to do their jobs in the name of national security. In this sense, *Iron Man 2* underscores the origin story from the previous

film, although it moves on from international terrorism by focusing on two villains with personal grudges against Stark that drive their desire for power – Whiplash, the son of a disgraced Russian partner of Stark’s father who develops his own Iron Man suit, and Justin Hammer, a rival industrialist and arms producer. By focusing on foreign and domestic threats, the film “highlights the vulnerability of US security” (Pheasant-Kelly, 2013, p. 158).

The two other origin stories, released in April and July 2011, feature Thor and Captain America, introducing them to a broader public outside of the comic books. *Thor* shows an old empire adrift introducing the mythological realm of Asgard:

With the last great war ended, we withdrew from the other worlds, and returned home, to the realm eternal. Asgard. And here, we remain as the beacon of hope. Shining out across the stars. And though we have fallen into man's myths and legends, it was Asgard, and its warriors, that brought peace to the universe.

While the place is completely fantastical, the positioning of the US on the one hand as a protective, militarised, and benevolent force, allegorically represented through Asgard, and Earth as the space to be protected is established early on and continued also throughout the film’s sequels. The circumstance that Thor’s love interest, Jane Foster, is from Earth underscores the gendered nature of this specific spatial constellation. Furthermore, the protagonist loses his hammer as a punishment and spends the rest of the film recovering it. The journey from being a young, arrogant, unappreciative boy (Thor unnecessarily escalates the conflict between the Frost Giants and Asgard at the beginning of the film, bringing the whole plot in motion) to a considerate and, most importantly, benevolent military man parallels his ability to retrieve his hammer. *Thor* introduced another of the Cold War era Marvel characters, like Hulk and Iron Man, but one rooted in some of Earth’s oldest myths, adding an important puzzle piece to *The Avengers* team that would assemble the following year. However, *Captain America: The First Avenger* brought back a longer-standing character of specific representational importance for American identity. The appearance of Captain America, ultimately, has two functions. First, it showcases a benevolent, protective form of masculinity, similar to Thor, while second, it grounds the contemporary political context, the beginning of the Obama administration and the new ‘War on Terror’, and connects it to the historical narrative of World War II that was the period of Captain America’s first appearance. As McSweeney argues, “although Steve is a more traditional form of masculine hero, even in the 1940s he embodies aspects of the new man arche-type in his sensitivity and emotional vulnerability” (McSweeney, 2018, p. 102). In the films, the other Avengers as well as S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury consistently refer to Steve Rogers as Captain Rogers or Cap rather than Captain America. This familiarity in the way the superheroes refer to each other erases the nationalistic aspect and creates a more international vibe for the global film audience. When Rogers is referred to

as Captain America it is usually during his World War II origin story or by outsiders such as the media in the films.

Captain America's becoming, again similar to Thor, goes hand in hand with the discovery and the change of his masculinity. Steve Rogers starts out as a regular man in his 20s who is overly eager to join the war in Europe against Nazism but gets rejected by the military over and over again due to his weak physique. Furthermore, as it becomes clear at the beginning, he is inexperienced with women and clearly inferior to British agent Peggy Carter, his later love interest. After taking part in an experiment to create a super-soldier, he develops superhuman abilities, mostly connected to speed and strength. But it is not until a final test that he can become a superhero: Initially Captain America is exploited as a recruiting tool and becomes part of a touring entertainment show. It is only when he is at the frontlines that he proves his worth, stationed with the same division that – as it turns out – his father served in during World War I. He single-handedly rescues a group of American soldiers that were taken prisoner by the arch-villain, Red Skull, the Nazi leader of Hydra. While the symbolism of the paternal connection to his father might seem quite obvious, he furthermore gains the recognition of the military and, most importantly, Peggy Carter herself. Only after these events does he acquire his first real shield. The issues of potency – Thor rediscovering his hammer, Captain America discovering his shield – however ultimately lead to a rephrasing of heroic masculinity: Prudent, rational, and benevolent rather than arrogant and belligerent.

This connects well with Iron Man's first two films. While the hero is less restrained than Thor and Captain America, the rediscovering of a more benevolent masculinity still applies to him. That is why American exceptionalism is omnipresent not only in *Captain America: The First Avenger* but furthermore in *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*. The American use of military power is then also displayed as something unique "through its moral use of technological superiority" (Dittmer, 2011a, p. 122), while the character development of Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor furthermore demonstrates how violence is used by the good guys only reluctantly and as a means of protection. The complicity of philanthropic heroism and military industry is, again, furthermore underscored by DC's *The Dark Knight Rises*. In this sense, both sequels serve as a continuation of the 'War on Terror' with military means, perpetuating a tendency in US foreign policy that supposedly vanished with Obama, himself a seemingly benevolent leader with more appeasing rhetoric. This is the reason why the heroic masculinities shown in the origin stories of Captain America and Thor seem to fit a lot better to the kind of presidential character Obama was supposed to be. This is buttressed through the productions of *X-Men: First Class* (2011), and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), both of which are purposeful sequels or reboots for their respective franchises.

The filmic set-up which increasingly connects American spaces to issues of security and threat did not go unnoticed on the side of observers. Furthermore, a trend that has started already with *Spider-Man* in 2002 continued, namely that despite direct or indirect political references they were seen as escapist. Even though this might sound paradoxical, precisely this point is the strength of the now established genre. Audiences managed to connect *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* with a new era of US foreign policy. Drawing on the notion of benevolent masculinity, the perception of some reviews saw *Thor* as an anti-Bush allegory (Labuza, 2011; Stewart, 2011), arguing that “the events that follow Thor’s dismissal by Odin represent a kind of dream of how we wish things had turned out in the last decade, as the world is saved and united by a leader who understands that might doesn’t [sic] always equal right, but isn’t afraid to kick a little ass when it does” (M. Singer, 2011). The figures of Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America were then also seen as leadership shifts, encouraged by the election of Obama (Curley, 2019). As Ben Walter points out, “The superhero movies of the Bush era showed America grappling with the limits of power. Iron Man 2 suggests a country anxious and uncertain about what lies at its core and beyond its reach, and with a taste for the comforts of nostalgia” (Walters, 2010).

The commercial success and increasing political meaning of the superhero genre also raised the attention of the Pentagon and the CIA who traditionally practice a very strong, at times symbiotic relationship with elements of Hollywood (Robb, 2004; Schou, 2016). Productions such as the *Transformers* series (2007, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2018) or *G.I. Joe* (2009, 2013) enjoyed the technical and hardware support of the Department of Defense (DoD) and turned very successful commercially, together with fantastical cinematic representations from *Avatar* (2009) to the last three *Harry Potter* films (2009, 2010, 2011) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2017). The cultural abilities of the Obama presidency are then also reflected in the way the military-industrial-entertainment complex developed, as the relationship between these industries under Obama “suggests a conviction on behalf of the US DoD that the predominantly positive image of the American military created in these films was reaching the intended audiences and thus represented a worthwhile investment” (Löfflmann, 2017, p. 39).

It is thus no surprise that *Iron Man* had also raised the attention of the DoD. Also, textually, the film positions the military very clearly; when Tony Stark is confronted by a critical journalist about his business as an international arms dealer, Stark responds: “It’s an imperfect world but it’s the only one we got. I guarantee you the day weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace, I’ll start making bricks and beams for baby hospitals [...] All those breakthroughs, military funding, honey.” The gendered nature of Stark’s speech further positions the militarised thinking as realistic and viable while infantilising any form of critique. This supports Tanner Mirrlees argument that “Iron Man serves the

U.S. DOD as a form of DOD-Hollywood militainment that glorifies the Air Force and promotes the military-industrial-academic-complex's R&D on cyborg-soldier weapons technology" (Mirrlees, 2013, p. 9). The Pentagon was, thus, very much involved in producing *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2* (Secker, 2012).

The DoD directives for funding and/or supporting Hollywood productions emphasise the criteria of representing "national interest" (Mirrlees, 2016, p. 182) and "'accuracy' and 'realism'" (Löffmann, 2013, p. 283), so it seems curious if not entirely absurd that *Iron Man* would receive corresponding support. Be that as it may, the Pentagon actually refused to fund *The Avengers* as they felt threatened by the existence of S.H.I.E.L.D., the heavily resourced secret intelligence and security organisation, which developed the Avengers Initiative. Phil Strub, DoD entertainment liaison, explained the refusal to assist in a statement that reveals plainly the co-constitutive nature of post-'9/11' security discourse: "We couldn't reconcile the unreality of this international organization and our place in it [...] To whom did S.H.I.E.L.D. answer? Did we [the Pentagon] work for S.H.I.E.L.D.? We hit that roadblock and decided we couldn't do anything with the film" (C. Garcia, 2012). This illustrates the extent to which superhero narratives and their filmic products exceeded their function as entertainment and became political products, relevant and even threatening to policymakers in the Obama administration who feared their own purpose might somehow be perceived as being supplanted by the fictitious Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., whose job it is to help defend America and the whole planet from threats domestic, foreign and extraterrestrial. Indeed, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s name was updated for the post-'9/11' era. It had begun life during the Cold War in Marvel comics as the Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage and Law-Enforcement Division, with a nod to NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). In the 1990s, the acronym changed to the less memorable Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate, but for the post-'9/11' Marvel Cinematic Universe it has become Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division which fits more aptly with the 'War on Terror' narrative.

As Obama led the 'War on Terror' into new directions, the superhero genre became more firmly established in post-'9/11' cinema. In 2012 alone, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Dark Knight* (released in July) as well as *The Avengers* (released in April) finished within the top 7 at the box office, domestically and internationally, with *The Avengers* topping both. This most successful year for the genre so far coincided with the presidential election campaigns, bringing a sweeping victory for Barack Obama and a second term in office.

In *The Avengers*, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson and Captain America talk about preparation for the battle ahead in New York against an alien invasion:

Coulson: We made some modifications to the uniform. I had a little design input.

Captain America: The uniform? Aren't the stars and stripes a little...old-fashioned?  
Coulson: With everything that's happening and the things that are about to come to light, people might just need a little old-fashioned.

Yet again, Marvel skilfully combines the old and the new, celebrating and allegedly new era in US foreign policy while simultaneously looking back in time, reluctant and conservative and yet modern and robust.

### Avengers Assemble

This section will highlight how the turn to the superhero team is finally undertaken in *The Avengers* which is also the end of MCU's Phase One. In *Iron Man 2*, Tony Stark and James Rhodes (aka War Machine) have an indicative dialogue:

Rhodes: You wanna do this whole lonely gunslinger act but it's unnecessary, you don't have to do this alone.

Stark: You know, I wish I could believe that.

This view is leading into what Obama himself said just a month before the release of *The Avengers*:

I know it's tempting sometimes to get discouraged, to kind of think, well, maybe change just isn't possible. Maybe it was an illusion. But I want you guys to recall, I did say back in 2008, real change -- big change -- it's hard. It takes time. It takes more than a single term and more than a single President. What it takes is ordinary citizens who are committed to keep fighting and to keep pushing, and inching us closer and closer and closer to our country's highest ideals (2012a).

Obama's presidency turned the US from the stale unilateralism of the Bush era, from the focus on the individual, to make politics and ultimately security a team sport where cooperation with allies is seen as essential. Throughout its Phase One, the MCU and other superhero films had become an articulation of how America should be. As much as the superhero genre is saturated with themes of individualism and a phobia against governmental oversight, there are also always ambivalences that allow for shifts and changes. In other words, while both individualism and anti-governmental positioning remain in place, superheroes still constantly renegotiate these relationships, especially in times of crisis. Obama's election reinforced a move towards a more cooperative environment. His campaign and the first term of his presidency were built on a vision of America coming together. It was also about trying to build a foreign policy that took seriously the responsibilities of being a powerful nation. Indeed, as Obama stated when he visited China in February 2012, evoking memories of Spider-Man's mantra from 2002: "We have tried to emphasize that because of China's extraordinary development over the last two decades, with expanding power and prosperity also comes increased responsibilities" (Obama quoted in Reeve, 2012).

In *The Avengers*, Joss Whedon presents us with the big finale of Phase I of the MCU by bringing Iron Man, Hulk, Thor and Captain America, whose origin stories audiences had been following for the past

four years, together. Characters who had also previously introduced in those earlier films, such as Hawkeye, Black Widow, and Thor's villainous half-brother Loki, also feature. While other films in Phase One had taken their stories to different locations around the world (though still very much grounded in American spaces and coded as American stories), *The Avengers* brings all of them back to New York as a team to battle for the future of the world; significantly returning to the city in which the *real* battle for the world's future had started on September 11, 2001.

The film made great efforts to bring all the different characters together as a team where everyone is needed. Director Joss Whedon, who drew inspiration from the war film *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), elaborated in an interview: "People think it's all about the mission, but it's all about the team, really. When you do a film like this you have to make sure each character matters as much as the others, but in a different way. That was something that was really important to me. Making sure everyone mattered" (Huddleston, 2013). After the immediate reaction to '9/11' which focused more on the individual response (think of Bush and his almost unprecedented ability to shape the early narrative of the 'War on Terror' and the sheer endless heroisation of individual firefighters, police officers, soldiers, etc.), ultimately, the crisis experienced through '9/11' and the increasing polarisation within America led to this attempt to create unity, framing crisis as something that can only be responded to as a team effort. Already during his keynote speech at the National Democratic Convention in 2004, Obama invoked a language he would repeat countless times after: "The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. [...] We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America" (Obama, 2004). Fittingly, Phase One of the MCU comes to an end when it becomes clear that the threats of the 'War on Terror' should be met with different means, as was announced by Obama during his presidential campaign and maintained after (Ashbee & Dumbrell, 2017).

*The Avengers*, furthermore, returns to a more explicit engagement with '9/11', while it has to be said that the event itself is never mentioned and audiences can only assume that the event is part of the film's diegesis. But there are indications that make the film very much readable as a post-'9/11' film. As McSweeney analyses:

Without mentioning the events of 11 September 2001 on a single occasion, the transgenerational heroism of *The Avengers*, set against the backdrop of a metaphorical recreation of that day, leads to it becoming one of the most significant American films of what is now referred to as post-9/11 American cinema (2018, p. 124).

What McSweeney addresses here is the specific mixture of narratives and visuals that come together in the film. It is not hard to read *The Avengers* as a post-'9/11' film, mostly because of features we have



seen before in cultural texts. It is no coincidence that New York is the location where the battle between the heroes and the alien race Chitauri takes place. Throughout the battle scenes, the city can very easily be identified as New York, and specifically Midtown Manhattan. Additionally, the destruction within the city functions as an aesthetic reminder of '9/11'. What becomes furthermore clear is that governmental bodies are failing. The World Security Council – a not so subtle reference to the United Nations – is failing to provide any security for the city, let alone the world. The NYPD loses control of the situation the moment the attack on New York begins. Both are overridden by Captain America and Iron Man, as epitomised in a scene in which an NYPD officer asks Captain America, "why should I take orders from you?" only to accept the First Avenger's leadership seconds later after four Chitauris attack him.

At the end of the film the destruction of the city is showcased, together with images of civilians, barely surviving the attack, and firefighters, again, invoking images of '9/11'. While it seems paradoxical that references to the 'War on Terror' or the traumatic incident itself become less subtle – as seen in *Iron Man* or *The Avengers* – it is merely a sign of the change within the superhero genre itself. While earlier superhero films might have tried to avoid direct references to '9/11', the event was always at the centre of the filmic text, if coded. Now, the films might become more direct but still refrain from mentioning it, while the aesthetic and narrative side of the films is clearly linked to the event. As Brown argues: "Superhero movies as metaphors for 9/11, even if obvious ones, can allow enough distance for audiences to enjoy the fictional reenactment and more positive resolution" (2017, p. 65). Within the diegetic realm of the films, the trauma itself remains unclear, that is to say that the audience doesn't know whether '9/11' took place or not. As previously discussed, in *Superman Returns* the trauma is completely erased while constantly present as it is reiterated that Superman has left New York at a time when they would have needed him. A conversation between Captain America and S.H.I.E.L.D director Nick Fury parallels this sentiment:

Captain America: When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost.

Nick Fury: We've made some mistakes along the way. Some very recently.

Captain America: Are you here with a mission, Sir?

Nick Fury: I am.

Captain America: Trying to get me back into the world?

Nick Fury: Trying to save it.

It remains unclear which mistakes Fury refers to here, but the fact that they were apparently recent leaves little to the imagination that it is not somehow connected to the 'War on Terror' and audiences would not need to think very much to conclude that he could mean the Iraq War. Cap's sentimental reference to World War II and the remark that something was lost position the film quite clearly from the onset. The short dialogue ends with Fury trying to get Cap to save the world, yet again, as he did in

‘good war’ while at the same time, he insists on making the world safe. The evocation of New York as the place for apocalyptic battle and sacrifice and the role of Captain America as historical corrective play a crucial role in the way the film is positioned.

Yet again, the film attempts to create a form of historical continuity that remains flawed and confused. The narrative and visual connection between World War II and ‘9/11’ curtails historical complexities and legitimises the actions of Captain America and – as an extension – the rest of the Avengers, mostly consisting of violence and force. In a very blatant attempt to create a specific form of continuity, Loki is confronted by a trio of the Avengers while he is stealing some iridium in Stuttgart, Germany. While there is no dramaturgical necessity for this scene to be set in Germany, it is pivotal to position events elsewhere in historical terms. While Loki threatens a group of German civilians and forces them to kneel in front of him, he gets confronted by a visibly older German:

German civilian: Not to men like you.

Loki: There are no men like me.

German civilian: There are always men like you.

Just when Loki aims and tries to shoot at the German with his staff, Captain America intervenes, deflecting Loki’s beam with his shield. He then goes on to say: “You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.” The scene is hardly coded but full of historical references. The *man* that is invoked here clearly refers to Adolf Hitler, comparing Loki to him, as a consequence, legitimises the *disagreement* which naturally has to end in violence. The old German man gives the impression as if he had lived through the tyranny of the Third Reich, which is the reason he is standing up to Loki. The fact that he gets saved by Captain America – again – underscores not only how Captain America moves through time as a protector of the defenceless but, furthermore, how the US itself understands their mission in the world as timeless and to some extent spaceless, but surely heightened since ‘9/11’. As Kooijman argues,

the American interpretation of 9/11 is globally mediated through American popular culture – Hollywood film, television series, pop music – which tends to present the often explicitly American experience as an allegedly ‘universal’ one, thereby emphasising the idealism of a cultural ‘America’ (often identified as ‘imagined’ or ‘mythic’) as the embodiment of ‘liberty’ and ‘democracy’ over the political actions of the American nation-state (2012, p. 183).

However, Captain America is not capable of overpowering Loki on his own, as he is supported by Black Widow and Iron Man. Nonetheless, the scene successfully fulfils its function to regulate the relationship with the rest of the world. Later in the film, when New York is at the brink of *falling*, the World Security Council decides to fire a nuclear missile against the Chitauri, even though it will mean sacrificing thousands of civilian lives. The only voice against it is S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury. While the Avengers are capable not only of fighting off the actual threat, the Chitauri, they also manage to fend off the

nuclear attack. But the contrast to the Security Council is crucial – the council remains obscure and opaque, only to be revealed as having been undermined by Hydra in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014). Thus, it ultimately remains the task of the Avengers – American superheroes – to fight the battle for New York as a proxy for the world. The film’s conclusion again gives us the image of the ‘9/11’ falling man, as Iron Man falls powerless from the sky after selflessly intercepting the nuclear missile and flying it through the eye of the alien wormhole above the city to end their attack. Tony Stark is saved from a sacrificial death by the Hulk but his and the team’s credentials as the people’s heroes are assured, as a series of citizen testimonies in the immediate news reports of the battle demonstrate.

A trend that had started already with films such as *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* was also continued in *The Avengers* and other films of that time, namely the trend to make the films inherently American, more than they already are. Some superheroes are connected to clear American spaces such as, not surprisingly, Captain America to Brooklyn or Daredevil to Hell’s Kitchen. But even within Marvel comics, there are stories that are more complicated, for example, Magneto and Professor X in the X-Men. For a long time, Professor X is an American expat living in England while Magneto is a German Jew. Thus, the locations of the plot can change as well. In DC comics, Batman does not live in New York or Chicago but in Gotham – even though New York was nicknamed Gotham in the early 1800s (Burrows & Wallace, 1998), Batman’s fictional home is also often likened to Chicago due to its reputation for organised crime. Superman lives in Metropolis rather than New York, his parents live in Smallville. While they all are quite clearly identifiable as American, the link to American soil and, as an extension, American history becomes explicit either within the narrative or visually, by making the cities clearly identifiable as American cities. In *The Avengers* or *The Amazing Spider-Man* the link is made within the filmic text but even the more coded ones do not leave room for doubt. Asgard in *Thor* or Gotham in *The Dark Knight Rises* leave little room for interpretation which city or nation is displayed here. This plays into the resurfacing of ‘9/11’ as a theme, the connection of the battle against evil to American soil. However, these battles are not fought for the American cause alone, they are fought on behalf of the rest of the world by American superheroes. However, this is not seen as something imperial, on the contrary, as much as Obama made clear that American exceptionalism is real, it must coexist with others – but then the values at the core of American exceptionalism are nonetheless regarded by Americans as universal in their appeal and necessary for the betterment of all human society.

What US foreign policy makers and cultural producers have struggled with since ‘9/11’ was not only how to engage with the event itself but to, furthermore, paradoxically fit the allegedly singular, unprecedented event into the eternal continuity that is the American nation. “That time that has passed since 1964 [when Stan Lee introduced Cap to the Avengers] has been telescoped into continuity, which is openly non-historical and doesn’t move forward at any set pace. But the period of time when Captain

America was out of the continuity altogether is treated as historical” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 44). Thor, Captain America, and Iron Man might emphasise different aspects of masculinity and historical continuity, but they fulfil a similar function. Iron Man’s cinematically changed origin story, while being positioned in a real-life setting, lacks any form of historical or political context. As we’ve seen, the Vietnamese that capture him in the 1960s comic books are replaced by Afghan counterinsurgents but this blatantly banal attempt to create historical context fails. What it does, however, is to create a rather simplistic continuity, namely that the bad guys might take different shapes but remain essentially the same. At the same time, Iron Man insists on muscular militarism as the cornerstone of US foreign policy and national interest. While *Thor* seems more removed from political realities, the Asgardians are immediately established as a superior, exceptional, and literally eternal empire with the obligation and the power to protect the other worlds. The fight between good and evil is then also left decontextualized and more as part of a broader American mission.

Introducing Captain America as the last of the founding Avengers to the screen does not diminish his importance for the franchise or as a political symbol, on the contrary. His solo film would lead directly into *The Avengers* the following year. As a World War II veteran, his historical role is clear as an unabashedly positive one while the shield he is carrying and the character traits he is showing emphasise his role as a protector with no hidden agenda of his own but to protect America. This is not only reduced to American territory and the homeland but to national values and, ultimately, America’s soul. At the end of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Red Skull and Captain America meet one last time:

Red Skull: You could have the power of the gods! Yet you wear a flag on your chest and think you fight a battle of nations! I have seen the future, Captain! There are no flags!

Captain America: Not my future.

The idea of having a world without nations (not even to mention without America) is tainted by being expressed by Red Skull, a Nazi and head of Hydra. All that is required is the quick rejection by Captain America to suggest his commitment to the flag – obviously the American one – and, as an extension, freedom and democracy. This has also crucial implications for *Captain America: Civil War* five years later as the Avengers are getting sucked into a battle over precisely these values.

Drawing on the comic books, the film shows how Steve Rogers gets frozen in time during the final battle against Red Skull and Hydra and only gets unfrozen in contemporary times by S.H.I.E.L.D. This plot device is crucial as it becomes possible to make Captain America an eternal presence. He is forever bound to the ‘good war’ while this very memory can be invoked whenever it is needed, in this case, Obama’s ‘War on Terror’. This move is dangerous because it juxtaposes different eras of US foreign policy in an uncomplicated way, creating its very own form of continuity. In a more complex way, the

X-Men franchise tried to engage with historical continuity, for example, *X-Men Origins Wolverine* (2009) focuses on the origin story and the life of Logan (who becomes Wolverine) and his brother Victor. The film depicts them fighting in various wars from the American Civil War, World War I, World War II to Vietnam, with the latter clearly being marked as a negative experience which also negatively affects the two brothers. The historical lens is also continued in *The Wolverine* (2013) which engages with Japan and the atomic bomb attack on Nagasaki. Through the whole franchise, however, Wolverine fulfils two functions, namely evoking the Cowboy genre within the superhero genre (Wolverine, probably more than any other superhero, is a radical individualist and almost outlaw-like character, unwilling to help but somehow still always ready to protect the innocent) while manifesting himself as someone who has gone through all the crises and conflicts of US history, not like Captain America in a frozen state but due to his mutation which allows him to heal rapidly and live an extended life.

The historical framing of some of the characters such as Captain America, Iron Man, and Wolverine lead us through periods in American history that connect contemporary audiences, who are experiencing the 'War on Terror', to more positive events of the past. In doing so, said superheroes are vindicated, detached from the messy conflicts that became almost normal in the way the American population conceived of foreign policy around ten years after '9/11'. And thus, they managed to present a new form of conflict resolution, which surely had to work since – see Captain America – their approaches had been successful in the past. This second wave of origin stories is seen “through the comforting prism of the uncomplicated moral binarism it has conveniently been remembered as; of an unambiguous war of good versus evil, fought for justice and honour rather than the complicated geopolitical conflict that it actually was” (McSweeney, 2018, p. 50). This creates a double-edged situation. First, the reliance on flawed historical comparisons and analogies contributes nothing to the complexities of contemporary conflicts and thus makes it virtually impossible to draw correct conclusions about how to move forward. This does not mean that history cannot teach lessons, but this can hardly come from a place of reading history as clear cut and self-evident. Second, to emphasise this point, these flawed analogies enhance the temptation to read current affairs as similarly clear which, again, can have treacherous consequences for foreign policy. Ultimately, it normalises a convenient relationship between history and the audiences who engage with it.

The relationship between the audiences of superhero texts and the superheroic characters could then also be negotiated new, moving on from the frustrating memories of the Bush era to Obama. After '9/11' it was the individual hero who came onto the cinema screen, as much as Bush represented a messianic figure in a moment of existential national crisis. But now it was the time to move on to new ways to fight the 'War on Terror', namely as a team.

### A new crisis?

In this section, I will discuss how the shift from the Bush administration and the rewriting of American foreign policy remains eventually futile. This is to say that a new crisis to the self-image and identity of America was already underway. The assassination of Osama bin Laden, for example, did not bring long-term peace or even satisfaction for an act that was not only geopolitically and legally problematic but furthermore opens up moral questions that should come to haunt Obama.

The way the superheroes engaged with their enemies on the big screen paralleled what has started under Bush and became now a full-blown reality: The endemic security crisis and the permanent state of exception as well as the fragmentation of American society became fixed prisms through which US foreign policy was not only conceived by Americans but also through which strategies of US policymakers were changing. The move to targeted killing and the change in rhetoric did not change the way the 'War on Terror' was conducted, let alone put an end to it. The promise of making the war 'better' and 'cleaner', as McCrisken points out (2011), were strategic considerations, fitting to what Obama had promised during his campaign. However, the continuation of Bush's anti-terror foreign policy makes sense, given "how openly and forcefully he had asserted its core imperatives in his campaign for office, it should not have come as a surprise to anyone that President Barack Obama would continue Bush's 'war on terror' in all but name" (McCriskin, 2011, p. 787). This does not come as a surprise, had the 'War on Terror' always been established as a reaction to an event that was not only ahistorical but also fictionalised. Contrary to what the public has made of it, "Barack Obama has perpetuated, and in many ways deepened, that struggle. Despite some rhetorical changes, he has recommitted the US to an interpretation of that day's events and its consequences, which fuels the imperatives of an unending conflict against terrorism" (McCriskin, 2014, p. 40).

Making the conflict a cleaner affair in the hands of Americans was a claim supported by the superhero films at the time. The cinematic reboots of different superheroic texts parallel the reboot of the 'War on Terror'. At the same time, the reboots reinvigorated elements that have been there before, maybe assembled differently, but rather perpetuating the infinite nature of it. After all, superheroes always fought off enemies with the knowledge of them and their audiences that they could always reappear, and thus legitimising the eternal existence of superheroic characters. But this became even more heightened during Phase One of the MCU, the end to the Dark Knight trilogy, the reboot of the Spider-Man and X-Men franchises, all happening between 2008-2012 and undertaken by four different studios.

As Zulaika argues, "[t]he great political victory of the suicide bombers is that they imposed on US politics their own suicidal temporality of waiting and a culture grounded on the oracular knowledge of secret

intelligence, which then justified the War on Terror" (Zulaika, 2014, p. 178). What he indicates here is the changing nature of security and foreign policy strategies which consist of the paradoxical mixture between reacting to events while trying to anticipate and predict them. The consequence then is preventive reaction, which features heavily in superhero narrations. But it became clear that superheroes fit in well with the infinite nature of consecutive crisis and emergencies that international politics has become. Despite the attempt of Obama to control the narrative, as Neal argues, the 'War on Terror' has become a discursive formation circulating outside of the control of Western policymakers, and thus what "has been realised, many years after intuitive warnings, that the constitutive effects of that discourse exceed the intentions of its speaker." (Neal, 2008, p. 64) The unusual compromise between liberal and conservative camps that the 'War on Terror' in its Bush-like form was somehow over "keeps us tied in to an idea that the War on Terror somehow represents a break or exceptional departure from the dominant rhetoric and practices of world politics, rather than an escalation of ways of seeing the world that were already present and available" (Stephens, 2012, p. 62) and in doing so conceals violence behind it (Amoore, 2009).

But as these authors already point out, what had started under Bush was far from over. In 2012, three films from three different studios were not only very successful but furthermore pointed to a whole range of further films. *The Amazing Spider-Man* marked the second of three reboots (2001, 2012 and 2017) of the franchise, indicating more to follow. *The Dark Knight Rises* is the last part of the trilogy, but Batman is discussed multiple times over the film as a symbol, as someone who could be anyone. Consequently, in the end, another Batman takes over from Bruce Wayne, suggesting continuity. And in *The Avengers* we can see a device used within the MCU in almost every film since *The Incredible Hulk*, namely the use of mid- and post-credits scenes. From a marketing perspective, these aim to tease the next production but the commercialised expectation of the next sequel is also political, as the sequel only makes sense if the threat never stops and if the solution at the end is only temporary. The mid-credit scene in *The Avengers* features the evil titan Thanos for the first time, making clear that he is behind the challenges that the Avengers are facing. While he reappears in post-credits scenes in later films, he is only directly involved in the plot in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) four years later, making it clear that he, as the real threat, is always lurking in the background. The post-credits scene of *The Avengers* shows six exhausted Avengers at a Shawarma restaurant, the ultimate New York experience, but without the pomp of victory since they (and the audience) can sense the knowledge that defending New York from the Chitauri might not be enough.

The security crises – not original to but made extreme through '9/11' – could not be solved through Obama, despite hopes of American and international publics that he might be able to find solutions. And neither could the superheroes on the screen despite their superhuman abilities. As Baudrillard

points out, “all the security strategies are merely extensions of terror. And it is the real victory of terrorism that it has plunged the whole of the West into the obsession with security – that is to say, into a veiled form of perpetual terror” (2003, p. 81). The obsession with a specific set of security and foreign policy concerns could not be solved or alleviated. Again, it rather seems that in this time of reboots, sequels, and prequels, the unending sequential continuity of the ‘War on Terror’ becomes a political reality.

Even the assassination of bin Laden did not change anything. When Americans celebrated his death in May 2011 on the streets of cities and in front of the White House, holding provocative signs that read ‘Obama 1. Osama 0’, there was a sense that the ‘war’ was finally won (Carey, 2011). But we know that this was not the case. On the contrary, what became clear was that the endemic crisis of American national identity and foreign policy was not only not over but would be more and more spiralling into a permanent state. And so what Der Derian had diagnosed two years earlier rang true, namely that “What was missing was an enemy. In the absence of a credible flesh-and-blood version, the virtual enemy of uncertainty, manifested by the global event, would have to do” (2009, p. 211). This is where superheroes could credibly fill the void of depicting the battle between good and evil while, paradoxically, their victories could only ever be temporary to allow more stories to be told, a feature that started a long time before the contemporary cinematic productions (Mondello, 1976) but that allowed for the reimagining of contemporary security issues alongside vague and flawed historical comparisons. The celebrations about the death of a man who was made out to be more of a devilish caricature rather than a real person reinforce the power of fantasy in terrorism discourses, but it might also explain why any attempt for a solution remains futile. Zulaika sees counter-terrorism as an industry, composed of various government and private organisations “with the mission of studying and catching subjects whom they are never supposed to meet, see, or talk to – in short, do not mess with your fantasy relationship with the tabooed Terrorist by actually having a real bodily contact with the feared/desired monster” (2014, p. 177). And so, the superhero genre could instigate and deepen the fantasy relationship between ‘us’, the normal humans, Americanised through and through, and the ‘other’. And in this sense, the crisis became permanent.

Another aspect indicating future crises is mostly visible in *The Avengers*. Despite the team narrative deployed in the film and the overarching American narrative of war and turmoil to be solved together, rather than alone, there are obvious cleavages in the relationship between the characters, mostly Iron Man and Captain America. The philanthropic, corporate values of the individualistic Tony Stark collide over and over again with the measured, moralistic Rogers, embodying the whole of the American nation as Captain America. And while both are connected to each other as well as the likes of Hulk, Black Widow, and Thor through ideological features such as robust militarism and American nationalism, the



way they represent these features increasingly becomes a conflict of values. This would, however, not become a major problem until later in the film series.

Reading superhero films merely as a way to make more and more money (which they undoubtedly are) would not do the phenomenon itself justice. As already outlined in previous chapters, I aim to focus here on the role that popular culture has regarding foreign policy and security, of which the political economy is a part, but we should not forget that radiating from the films, they narrate and author a specific discursive landscape. Unlike Bush who always struggled with his own image and the declining traction of his 'War on Terror' after 2001, Obama represented a different character, almost taken from the world of popular culture and fiction. Generally speaking, Coyne argues that "Presidents, especially in our telegenic, telecentric age, are as much purveyors as they are consumers of US popular culture. Little wonder that the presidency, America's greatest gift to any citizen, has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Hollywood movies – America's greatest gift to the world" (Coyne, 2008, p. 41).

A crucial connection between the economic interests and the politics of superhero films is furthermore that the new forms of production also lead to a new form of sequentiality, not dissimilar to the ones of the comic book originals. The attempt to streamline the films, undertaken mostly by Marvel, DC and Fox, leads to a streamlining in the narratives of the comic books and the films while superheroes can function more than ever as brands as well as political artefacts. Not original to the Obama presidency but furthermore embedded within postmodern ways of producing the everyday, the production of superheroic texts underlines a longer trend:

The circulation of images for visual consumption is inseparable from centralized structures of economic power. Just as the earlier power of the state illuminated public space - the streets by artificial lamplight - so the economic power of major corporations - Disney, Sony, CBS - illuminates private space by electronic and manufactured images (Zukin, 1993, p. 237)

Had the production of these texts already worked to some extent prior to the Obama presidency, the comics and the cinematic reboots of the MCU in 2008 and the DCEU in 2013 paved the way to a better, more strategic expansion of said filmic texts. In this sense, the changes in production and distribution underline the plot structure of the films themselves, namely the way they are set out to be continued until infinity. What this underlines is the coupling of the mode of production, the commercial interests and the increasing box office success with the production of ever more connected and elaborate storylines and narratives that required more and more sequels and prequels to tie them all together.

What had also become clear at the beginning of the Obama years was that films which depicted direct features of the 'War on Terror' were quite often not very successful at box offices (Philpott, 2010). Even the academy award-winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) by Kathryn Bigelow underperformed at the box office, while audiences were more interested in presumably apolitical narratives of *Indiana Jones*

*and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, *Kung Fu Panda*, or *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*. More fantastical notions of how the world works were taking over not coincidental to the beginning of a presidency shrouded in heroic and fantastical notions of almost utopian dimensions.

The reboots in production make it only logical that all four major superhero film producers relied heavily on a second wave of origin stories after the ones seen at the beginning of the 2000s. At the same time, films made in the light of the Obama presidency clearly had to deviate from the Bush presidency as much as it was crucial for the Obama administration to essentially differ from the Bush administration. While Warner Brothers attempted to tell a new origin story with *Green Lantern* (2011) they also finished the Dark Knight trilogy with *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). More successful reboots were Fox's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and the prequel *X-Men: First Class* (2011) as well as Sony's *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012). The strategy of Marvel, however, was inscribed into their Phase One: The collection of origin stories of *Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008) was further supported by the appearance of *Thor* (2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) which would ultimately lead into the commercial and narrative highlight of Phase One, namely *The Avengers* (2012). This strategy, however, did not come without risks as at this point and commercial success was not guaranteed (McSweeney, 2018). But it would be the beginning of the immense, global multimedia circulation of heroes and stories, many of which had been broadly unknown to people before the cinematic boom.

The genre seemed to meet an excellent junction between clearly addressing contemporary issues that were reflected upon by some audiences while still being broadly seen as escapist. While Ensley (2014) argues that *The Avengers* works more like a war film – such arguments can surely be applied to the emergence of the genre as a whole – Hoberman does also detect not only post-'9/11' issues but furthermore ties the film to the financial crisis of 2008 (2012). In an interview with Joss Whedon and the main actors of *The Avengers*, Whedon gives an answer to the question of why reality doesn't offer the same catharsis as his films do:

The threats are so outrageous, they aren't really scary. And that's the point. We tell these stories in which there's a problem we can solve with our superhero fists because the bigger problems can't be. Those take time and millions of people and lots of dedication, and can't be solved in the space of a movie. What's really out there is a whole lot scarier than that alien army (Breznican, 2012).

Whedon's comment reveals yet again the almost paradoxical function that superheroes increasingly fulfilled in the years after 2001. On the one hand, the films not only depict but are also seen as metaphorical for the 'War on Terror' including various filmic elements that only indirectly or subtly engage with these issues. On the other hand, the films are seen as escapist and meant for entertainment purposes rather than political ones. But it is this paradox that makes them so powerful.

The catharsis that allegedly does not happen in reality does not happen in the films either, on the contrary, rather the catharsis is postponed over and over again, from sequel to sequel.

Loki actor Tom Hiddleston pleaded for the importance of superhero films a week before the release of *The Avengers*: “It’s the everyday stuff of every man’s life, and we love it. It sounds clichéd, but superheroes can be lonely, vain, arrogant and proud. Often, they overcome these human frailties for the greater good. The possibility of redemption is right around the corner, but we have to earn it” (Hiddleston, 2012). Hiddleston may have a point here, namely that superhero films always offer the possibility of redemption. But the neo-liberal charging of his statement already indicates its fallacy as the promise of redemption is never fulfilled but, on the contrary, is a structural impossibility. Hulk actor Mark Ruffalo adds to Hiddleston’s claim: “I think this movie is really a metaphor for where America is today and where we need to be to move forward [...] In the end, it’s the community working together, without the real egomaniacal leader. It’s going to take all of us working together, with all of our strengths” (C. Bell, 2012). The shift from the individual crisis manager to the team was completed.

*The Avengers* collapses various historical and political categories into one big spectacle. As Samira Nadkarni argues,

The simultaneous presence of Captain America and Iron Man creates a temporal play in which the events of the Second World War and 9/11 are made co-incident. This brings into focus the ‘Greatest Generation’ myth that grew in the aftermath of the Second World War and the US’ current position as a global superpower in the aftermath of those events. (2015, p. 16)

But in all the attempts to connect the ‘9/11’ trauma to past victories, underscored by the first term of an almost messianic president, the victory in the ‘War on Terror’ failed to materialise even after the assassination of bin Laden, indicating the perpetuity of it. The ‘War on Terror’ rather than being overturned into a period of heightened security concerns and threats on every corner. The superheroes, despite their superior powers, were unable to solve the conflicts they were set out to overcome while remaining in a reactive position, only awaiting the next threat to appear.

## Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how the first term of the Obama presidency eventually failed to end the ‘War on Terror’. What it has shown is that first, the plethora of reboots, new origins stories, prequels and sequels in superhero films signified a resetting of the political clocks in America. The re-introduction of characters in the form of origin stories gave the film studios the chance to re-invent themselves and their own production strategies. The films also expressed the desire to restart US foreign policy. Second, the presumed clear break between the disappointment of the Bush presidency and the newly lit hope of Obama also opened the door to depict leadership, US foreign policy, and the ‘War on Terror’ in a different way. The emphasis on benevolent, benign, masculine protectors synthesises the expectations

towards Obama and the reboots, especially within the MCU. *The Avengers* finally combines the strengths of the different characters, making saving and protecting the world a team effort. Obama's foreign policy was also very much driven by rekindling relationships with allies and showcasing America as leader of the free world again after the disappointment of the Bush presidency. Both, the superhero genre and Obama in his rhetoric, articulated a vision of how America *should* be. Third, the historical framing of *Captain America: The First Avenger* and others express the notion of continuity of political battle. The proposed narratives evoke comparisons to previous times setting current struggles in a relationship with those of the past, especially the 'good war' of World War II. But the resolutions they propose do not fulfil themselves. On the contrary, fourth, the 'War on Terror' continues unabated despite the attempts to make it better and cleaner. The assassination of Osama bin Laden – while celebrated with patriotic verve – does not bring the desired cathartic end to the 'War on Terror', demonstrating its flawed premise. This unresolved 'War on Terror' also means that the trauma of '9/11' remains untreatable. Rather, at the end of Obama's first term, we can already see the advent of a new crisis. This is impressively underlined by the post-credits scene in *The Avengers*. We don't see any form of celebration or victorious sentiment despite the fact that the Avengers had just pushed back an alien army and prevented the nuclear destruction of New York (and thus symbolically '9/11'). What we do see is Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow and Hawkeye sitting around a table at a Shawarma restaurant, eating in complete silence and demonstrating mutual exhaustion. What slowly becomes clear, leading into Obama's second term, is that there cannot be a catharsis, no resolution, but just a continuation of the 'War on Terror' resulting in the passive waiting of America and its superheroes for the next big crisis.

## Chapter 5 – Obama II and resistance

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse the last four years of the Obama presidency and its transitioning to the campaign 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as US president. Despite Obama's clear and successful re-election in 2012, questions were asked about his foreign policy conduct, especially regarding the practice and legality of using drones and targeted killing (Grayson, 2016a; McCrisken, 2013) as well as surveillance (N. Lee, 2015). While his election in 2008 seen as a "national catharsis" (Renshon, 2012, p. 5), it remained relatively unclear how this would look like or, especially in regards to issues of security, how this was about to be achieved. Rather than being able to appeal to various sides of the political spectrum and formulating a foreign policy vision that could unite the country, it became more and more difficult to find compromises across different political camps and views.

What I will show in this chapter is how the second term of Obama – rather than being a reconciliatory period – leads to a heightened polarisation within the American system, the perpetuation of the 'War on Terror' as both an American and global affair, and ultimately the collapse of formerly assumed stable elements of national identity. I will demonstrate how the superhero genre of this period is shaping specific discourses leading into crisis. The films encompass the whole of Phase II and the beginning of Phase III of the MCU as well as the reboot of DC's cinematic universe. Together with a few other productions, they develop a variety of discursive elements, speaking to the decline of Obama as a saviour figure – in this sense taking a parallel with George W. Bush – developing the pathway to a clash of values and, ultimately, a new post-9'11' crisis, culminating in Trump's election in 2016, only months after *Captain America: Civil War* was released.

Addressing these issues, I will engage with, first, how the frustration with Obama as president unfolded on the cinema screens; while films such as *Iron Man 3* or *Captain America: Winter Soldier* can be read as critical counter-narratives to Obama, in fact, they remain superficial, criticising isolated aspects of foreign policy and counter-terrorism but don't tackle bigger structural questions surrounding violence, surveillance, and counter-terrorism. This connects to Obama's unwillingness to continue the 'War on Terror' by adjusting the way it was fought with only slight variations in its official discourse (McCricken, 2014). Second, the tension between narrative and counter-narrative, affirmation and critique opens up a bigger normative question, namely the role that violence can and should play in America's engagement with threat, especially given Obama's original campaign assurances that things would be different and the belief among his supporters that the 'War on Terror' would draw to a close. As a consequence in the films, fear of the state and the state monopoly of violence is combined with anxiety towards a specific form of political community. That is to say that we can see a return to mythological

tropes which exacerbate a deep suspicion towards the state and emphasise a radical form of individualism. Third, the films then help to reinvigorate the use of violence as deeply connected to the mythologised space of the frontier and position it within historical moments of the past. Given the global success and circulation of the superhero genre and the universal omnipresence of the security-terrorism issue it would be wrong, however, to think of this frontier trope as an exclusively American one. On the contrary, what superhero films negotiate is a global frontier against terrorism, with America as the sole representative and civilisational pinnacle, and ultimately a legitimate carrier of violence. Fourth, I will analyse how the attempt to correct or manage violence as a means for counter-terrorism remains eventually futile. However, the discourse produces a national clash of values, producing two complete opposites that remain irreconcilable. This clash, ultimately, collapses in 2016, on the one hand, into a fierce presidential election campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and, on the other hand, into the fragmentation of the Avengers and the split between Captain America and Iron Man. The feeling that the US becomes “polarized and fragmented at the same time” (Dionne Jr, 2019) is an expression of the rise of an endemic and existential crisis to American national identity. However, I will also discuss how and why the Trump election and the aggravated sense of crisis should be seen as already present within the American DNA rather than something novel. This suggests that Trump is merely a symptom rather than the cause of this crisis.

### Counter-narratives and Obama’s foreign policy

This section engages with the increasing frustration with Obama from conservative and liberal sides of the political aisle and how those played out in the superhero films. From different sides, Obama was confronted with a variety of criticisms, some of which were more concretely formulated than others. Different commentators have argued that his policies did not match his promises in the way that the ‘War on Terror’ and the use of force abroad were supposed to become more restrained under his presidency (Hersh, 2017; Orelus, 2016; Sanger, 2013). Others criticised him for ultimately failing to reconcile America in the years after Bush (Kloppenberg, 2011). Another argument might be that structural changes are not only basically impossible for US presidents to implement but that, on the contrary, they have to be rejected, not only but especially in times of crisis (Ali, 2010). The election of Obama and the signifying function he fulfilled did not make things easier. That is to say that Obama, apart from other features of US mythology, expressed notions of sacrifice, martyrdom, and, ultimately, cathartic redemption (McCracken, 2012) that could not hold up to reality. The killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 was celebrated by enthusiastic Americans, but it was a short-lived victory and catharsis was unfulfilled.

The assassination of Bin Laden, repeatedly positioned as “caricaturish villain” (Spens, 2018, p. 180), was supposed to be one of these moments of national catharsis and closure with thousands of Americans

celebrating in the streets of major American cities. A year later, CNN journalist Kyle Almond reminisces the one-year anniversary of the Bin Laden killing by saying that “Bin Laden’s death brought 9/11 ‘closure’” (Almond, 2012). But this was, of course, not the case at all. On the contrary, in an analysis of Obama’s rhetoric regarding the assassination, Kyle Grayson points to the heightened “anxiety underpinning targeted killing events by regimes which identify themselves as liberal” (Grayson, 2016a, p. 81). As already argued in the previous chapter, Obama did not make the changes to his foreign and counter-terrorism policy that he had promised or that were fantasised about by his supporters. Consequently, he deepened the commitment of the US to perpetual war, making any efforts for redemption or salvation futile. Just like the superheroes are forever fighting their nemeses on the screen, Obama’s introduction of targeted killing and his kill list suggest a similar inescapable circle. The role of the films within this discourse becomes then even more important:

Once a situation is defined as one of inevitable terrorism and endless waiting, what could happen weighs as much as what is actually the case; once a threat, whose intention or possibility is unknown to us, is taken seriously, its reality requires that we must act on it. Terrorism is the catalyst for confusing various semantic levels of linguistic, ritual and military action based on the role played by fantasy (Zulaika, 2014, p. 179)

This logic was also applied by Obama as he “has frequently impressed on the US public his deeply held belief that terrorists are continually plotting attacks against the US and that without eternal vigilance at home, and unwavering dedication to directly combating threats abroad, the US remains vulnerable” (McCracken, 2014, p. 39). This point is important because it demonstrates how the ‘War on Terror’ was carried on by Obama despite the refusal of American policy makers to use the specific language that developed under Bush. Furthermore, the perpetuity and omnipresence of terrorism and associated issues led to the normalisation of a variety of inefficient, counter-productive and partly bizarre-looking counter-terrorism measures which are based on paranoid logics, leading into what Richard Jackson calls an “epistemological crisis of counterterrorism” (R. Jackson, 2015b, p. 33).

The launch of Phase II of the MCU develops a view that can be read as an expression of the frustration with Obama and the never-ending ‘War on Terror’ and was, furthermore, interpreted in parts as a counter-narrative to Obama’s foreign policy. *Iron Man 3*, as the first MCU instalment of their Phase II, depicts a terrorist called Mandarin who is visually and narratively positioned and “explicitly constructed as an Osama Bin Laden analogue as much as Ra’s al Ghul was in *Batman Begins*” (McSweeney, 2018, p. 111). As we find out in the film, however, the Mandarin is merely a cover, an actor playing a terrorist, paid for by Tony Stark’s long-time rival Killian Aldrich, thus revealing the threat as home-grown. Aldrich seeks to topple the American administration and replace the American president with a puppet one. The twist that the alleged terrorist, who sends out video messages similar to those that American and global audiences became so familiar with after ‘9/11’, is not the real villain could be seen as a

deconstructing move (M. Benjamin, 2018). But the film's critique that one must be careful who to suspect to be a terrorist (a potential critique of Obama's foreign policy) remains superficial. First, the threat itself is only enhanced through the visual reinvigoration of Muslim terrorism. The fact that the Mandarin turns out to be a mere puppet of Aldrich does not take away from the creation of an intimidating atmosphere for the first part of the film through the reliance on stereotypical aesthetic and rhetoric. Even more so, the perspective of the terrorists is not revealed since the Mandarin is just an actor. Second, the Mandarin does not only lack agency but is presented as pathetic and unmanly, clearly contrasted with Iron Man or Iron Patriot, described by the former as "embarrassing." This depiction underscores "negative representational practices with claims that bin Laden used a woman as a human shield to protect himself during the raid and later, that he had a large cache of pornography on his computer" (Grayson, 2016a, p. 85). Ultimately, the conflict with Aldrich and his puppet Mandarin is solved through a spectacle of violence, rendering void any serious reflection about how Americans think about terrorists and their representation.

The second film that has been seen as a critique of Obama, and specifically the NSA scandal during his presidency, is *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. Joe Russo, one of the directors of the film, made the point that the production of the film and the Edward Snowden affair played out at the same time, arguing this makes the film topical:

That stuff was already in the zeitgeist. We were all reading the articles that were coming out questioning drone strikes, pre-emptive strikes, civil liberties — Obama talking about who they would kill. [...] We wanted to put all of that into the film because it would be a contrast to [Captain America]'s greatest-generation [way of thinking] (Shear, 2014).

The film offers a critique of specific elements of the state. The organisation S.H.I.E.L.D. is subverted by Hydra which develops, in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s name, heavily armed flying aircraft carriers called Helicarriers which are designed to carry out a mission to preventively kill everyone who is perceived as posing a risk to national security. This take on the security vs freedom binary is engaged in during a brief dialogue between S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury and Captain America at the beginning of the film, discussing the organisation's targeted killing program:

Fury: We're gonna neutralise a lot of threats before they even happen.  
Captain America: Thought the punishment usually came after the crime.  
Fury: We can't afford to wait that long.  
Captain America: Who's 'we'?

Captain America concludes that "this is not freedom. This is fear." What is expressed here and comes up throughout the film is that while the film pretends to be critical, it merely tackles issues that have a long history in the way US foreign policy and security is debated, namely *how* American interests and individual security can be guaranteed without questioning the basic logics of national interest or



security itself. The suspicion against S.H.I.E.L.D. raised here speaks to a broader and traditional anxiety towards a state that can control and curtail individuals and individuals' freedom while not reflecting for even a moment on conceptions and societal or political circumstances of punishment or crime. In this sense, it contributes to the unquestioned support of a counter-terroristic foreign policy understanding based on violence, retribution, and preventive war. Once freedom is established as a key dogma, it becomes ideological and uncritical while everything allegedly standing in its way is automatically evil. This reduces the film to a dehistoricised battlefield for American values. What is interesting about the reception of both films is their unintended topicality, namely that that *Captain America: Winter Soldier* coincides with the NSA and Snowden affair on the one hand, while *Iron Man 3* was released only weeks after the Boston Marathon bombing. In this sense, Joe Russo might be right to refer to the zeitgeist (Shear, 2014). Both films make clear, furthermore, that something has changed 'after New York', referring to the events of *The Avengers* and in a not very discreet way '9/11'. But the dehistoricised engagement with the how (not if) of the use of violence makes the film a critique of contemporary foreign policy debates, but like *The Dark Knight* very much accessible for critics of Obama from liberal and conservative perspectives alike. In a similar way that observers and critics made sense of the 2008 Batman film, conservatives like Glenn Beck say that *Captain America: Winter Soldier* "should teach Hollywood" and describe the film as a "pro-American story" (Beck, 2014) while liberal commentators could make sense of it as a counter-narrative in its own right. Terrence McSweeney then argues that this discrepancy is an "indication of the seeming inability of genre to offer narratives that are able to challenge the times in which they are made in anything more than superficial ways" (McSweeney, 2018, p. 164).

While I agree with this assessment, the question is why *Captain America: Winter Soldier* and *Iron Man 3* could be seen as deconstructions or subversions, and thus critical artefacts. First, they do criticise specific aspects of the state, state control, and open up the question of *who* viable carrier of violence is. But the critical flickering is as quickly gone as it appeared, enabling a momentary resolution to the threats posed to Iron Man and Captain America only through violence. Second, what they express is not so much a (systemic) critique but rather an endemic crisis to Obama's foreign policy and the epistemological cul de sac that is the 'War on Terror'. The crisis (rather than critique) expressed is the collapse of the ability to protect. In *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) Spider-Man can't protect his love interest, Gwen Stacy, who dies after a fall. Iron Man has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the events of New York in *The Avengers* and Captain America has issues adapting to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, being consistently referred to as 'man out of time'. In *Thor: The Dark World*, New York is also referenced in a scene in which Thor's love interest, Dr Jane Foster, who seems completely oblivious to the existential nature of the battle of New York in *The Avengers*, echoing what Susan Faludi had diagnosed

as indirectly blaming women and the lack of the ability to protect America from '9/11' on the feminisation of society (Faludi, 2007). This is to say that during the Bush presidency as well as to some extent later on, voices that critically questioned the use of force as a response to terrorism would be accused of having an overly naïve view on things (I. M. Young, 2003, 2005). This underlined the position within American foreign policy that any alternative to violence would not only be unattainable but that pursuing such an alternative would contribute to the vulnerability that caused the September 11 attacks in the first place. The gendered nature of the scene between Thor and Jane also demonstrates how superheroes must show a masculine form of protection and vigilance.

The image we get half-way through Obama's second term is one of frustration and despair. The president himself engaged directly with the Marvel Cinematic Universe at this point by referencing Iron Man on two occasions, thus demonstrating further the co-constitutive nature of the MCU and his security policy. February 2014 during a press conference, Obama said: "Basically I am here to announce we're building Iron Man. I'm gonna blast off in a second. We've been...this has been a secret project we've been working on for a long time...not really...maybe...it's classified" (CNN, 2014). The reaction to the reference resembles the awkwardness that Obama's first public mention of drones in form of a joke in 2010 during the White House Correspondents Dinner. He warned the pop band Jonas Brothers to stay away from his daughters or otherwise meet the might of a Predator drone (McCracken, 2013). Obama doubled down on the Iron Man analogy in April 2016 at the University of Chicago Law School: "I wish I could just send in Iron Man. No, no, I don't mean this as a joke. I just mean I wish that the tragedy of war, conflict, terrorism, did not end up creating circumstances where we, wielding kinetic power, don't end up hurting anybody who shouldn't have been hurt" (Boyer, 2016). Again, the beginning of his reference was accompanied by laughter, his expanding on the point to *just send in Iron Man* then makes his point clear, positioning the 'War on Terror' and its ramifications on the one side and America's best intentions, *not to hurt anybody who shouldn't be hurt* on the other. The rhetorical move he is making here is significant as it shows the resonance of the Marvel films and their characters at the time. The theme raised by Obama also played out in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* in which Captain America appeals to broader themes of US foreign policy:

They almost have what they want. Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won't end there. If you launch these helicarriers today, Hydra will be able to kill anyone who stands in their way. Unless we stop them. I know I'm asking a lot. But the price of freedom is high. It always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not.

Thus, rather than reflecting about the way deeper structures of foreign policy are actually rooted in the political system itself and historical constellations the US might have been involved with. But since this is usually not done by any policymaker, media outlet, or the broader American public, lessons about

history and reflections about the ramifications of their foreign policy remain decontextualised and dehistoricised. What we can observe during the second term of the Obama administration are discussions about when, how, and who should exercise violence, but, not surprisingly, not whether force should be used at all. Thus, what is reinvoked in *Iron Man 3*, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, and the films that followed is an engagement with American values and myths rather than history and political issues. Regarding *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, McSweeney argues: “The film’s critical thrust and Cap’s primary role is to offer the idea that America is *more than* its institutions, and that it is its core *values* and *principles* which makes America great and distinguishes it from every other country” (McSweeney, 2018, p. 163).

### The suspicious state and the individual

This section serves to underline how this tension between the films serving as a counter-narrative or merely an affirmation of the status quo opens up a different question, namely what role violence plays as a solution for conflict. I argue that rather than criticising the use of violence or force itself or tackling broader structural questions of the ‘War on Terror’ – while still clearly engaging with these questions – what is questioned is who should use what form of violence. What is accentuated then are two main points: First, the expression of deep suspicion towards the state and the state monopoly of violence. Second, anxiety towards political community over the individual and individualism. The way these issues are presented in the films, however, touches upon a long history of mythologising them and remain dehistoricised for that reason. What is then proposed in the films is, first, an exacerbated anxiety surrounding the state and its actions and, second, a radical form of individualism.

The relationship between Americans and the state (or specific features and functions of the state) is a complex one. On the one hand, it is “through their obsession with the omnipresence of threat” that they “foster a culture of fear that reinforced the primacy of national security over all other social or political interests, thereby legitimizing the official security imaginary” (O’Meara et al., 2016, p. 227). On the other hand, the state has always been seen as a dangerous entity to some extent by various political commentators, at times equated with the government. The way that, for example, Ronald Reagan or Donald Trump exploited these suspicions, embedded within American founding myths, contributed to a large extent to their successful elections to become president. This paradoxical position is traditionalised, however, within American political discourse: be it Ronald Reagan’s assertion that “government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem” (Reagan, 1981) or Trump’s association of government with corruption while seeking to “drain the swamp” (Andrzejewski, 2019). In regards to the MCU and the television serial spin-off *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present), Nadkarni argues that they “manage both to critique and disavow the totalitarian policies that underlie this militarized state, while insisting on the need for a continued and increased military presence.”

(Nadkarni, 2015, p. 2) This means that when perceiving the state with suspicion, particular underlying values associated with American mythology and, quite often, militarised versions of society remain intact while other features of the state such as its potential role in guaranteeing social and welfare policies and everything associated with curtailing individual liberties and freedom is discarded and rejected. Even more so, the dichotomy between the totalitarian state and individual freedom becomes an existential issue. At the same time, American and international audiences have grown accustomed to the security and securitised state and violence as the primary operating tool of foreign policy so that these features of the state became normalised. As O'Meara et al argue: "Even movies critical of the national security state appealed to a shared narrative of American identity to argue that, far from protecting American values, the national security state was undermining so-called authentic Americanism" (O'Meara et al., 2016). Consequently, what is removed from the films of the MCU, DC, and others is a form of topicality and, as such, historical or systemic critique. But the critique is expressed rather through status quo affirming reinvigorations of American mythology. As Slotkin argues:

We resort to our myths not merely to evade the discontents of our historical moment, but to find something - a precedent, a bit of wisdom, a new perspective - that will allow us to imagine a way of coping with and even transforming the present crisis. Mythic space is a metaphor of history, and the heroes in a functioning mythological system represent models of possible historical action (1992, p. 88)

In this sense, Captain America as well as other superheroes of the period, such as Iron Man, Thor, and Spider-Man fill this mythic space. This makes the issues expressed in the films, such as questions of threat, surveillance and control, or security removed from contemporary contexts (even though, again, it is easy to interpret some of them as talking directly to the Obama era) but more a matter of existential and endemic Americanness. This is then also underlined by appealing to nostalgia, especially in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), through the active use of familiar rock, pop and dance music from the 1970s and the showcasing of idyllic rurality in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) or *Man of Steel* (2013).

The use of violence and the uncompromising engagement with threat and those who display a threat remain unreflected. As much as Obama criticised and rhetorically deviated from his predecessor while keeping the fundamental structures of the 'War on Terror' intact, Captain America and his fellow heroes then keep on criticising and questioning the state without questioning the necessity of the military-industrial complex (Dittmer, 2013). The fear of any kind of governmental or state control is furthermore juxtaposed with what Captain America and some politicians have expressed as freedom or liberty. This problematic juxtaposition then leads into the accentuation of individualism while community is rejected as a concept.

Yet another paradoxical relationship is made more or less explicit namely the role of the individual vs community. Especially when we consider that the turn to the superhero team such as the Justice League, Guardians of the Galaxy or The Avengers is mostly happening during the first term of Obama in which he reinforced the togetherness as one nation over and over again. In his State of the Union Address 2012 he ends on the following note:

No one built this country on their own. This nation is great because we built it together. This nation is great because we worked as a team. This nation is great because we get each other's backs. And if we hold fast to that truth, in this moment of trial, there is no challenge too great; no mission too hard. As long as we are joined in common purpose, as long as we maintain our common resolve, our journey moves forward, and our future is hopeful, and the state of our Union will always be strong (Obama, 2012b).

In his unparalleled way, he manages to tie a specific version of exceptionalism, nationalism, and crisis together. This underscores the conflict that Tony Stark and Captain America face during *Avengers: Age of Ultron*:

Stark: How were you guys planning on beating that [alien army]?

Cap: Together.

Stark: We'll lose.

Cap: Then we'll do that together, too.

What both Obama and Captain America negotiate successfully over and over again is the insistence on America as a project or journey (McCracken, 2003) while furthermore insisting on individualism and its connection to freedom and liberty. To this extent, the hero – in the everyday or on the cinema screens – still has to be a loner who can only to some extent identify with the nation:

People can feel close to and identify with the nation because it is neither Big Government nor 'the country,' both of which are associated with domestic politics. For them, the nation is a symbol. Although that nation may officially be represented by the makers of foreign policy, judging by the polls, people appear to treat it as an abstract and expressive symbol to be identified with rather than to be used for debating foreign policy (Gans, 1988, p. 61).

Drawing on traditionalised tropes of cowboys and detective stories within American culture, Bellah et al argue that this specific form of individualism is not seen, however, as selfish but inherently heroic and selfless: "One accepts the necessity of remaining alone in order to serve the values of the group. And this obligation to aloneness is an important key to the American moral imagination" (Robert N. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 146). After all, the hero has to be a loner too. Individualism then becomes an imperative while specific forms of community remain dangerous.

A whole range of superhero films during this period exaggerate the suspicion of the state or community into alienating fantasies touching upon themes of assimilation and annihilation (of freedom and individuality). What I mean here is not community in the sense of the nuclear family or the rural village as space of tranquillity and peace. It is rather

the interpretation of a collective as made up of oppressed individuals, and the re-coding of groups as mere instrumental conveniences chosen by individuals for instrumental purposes: all of these rhetorical devices make their appearance in official discussions of policy toward communism, ethno-nationalism, radical Islam, and so forth (P. T. Jackson & Nexon, 2003, p. 163)

The point here is that American popular culture and foreign policy is traditionally rejecting the expression of collectivism or societal community. This anxiety is anything, but a confirmation of the role and value of individualism and seems exaggerated into a rejection of anything resembling broader ideas of collective security or society.

In a variety of superhero films the main characters do not necessarily fight for survival of themselves and/or the world alone but rather against assimilation into a collective. The dichotomy between individual and collective is reiterated in various cultural artefacts and stands at the centre of ideological imperatives policymakers are following. This is reflected in American national identity by the tension between individualism and liberty on the one hand and equality on the other. Furthermore, this is expressed by the mythologised small-town America versus the atomising effect of the big city. In line with this it, seems that survival (as opposed to death) becomes secondary to the threat of assimilation (which would mean a continuation of existence). In *Age of Ultron* and *X-Men: Apocalypse* the main antagonists are already part of the film title, namely Ultron and Apocalypse. Both share an anti-individualistic approach and are idealistic in their own way. Apocalypse destroys the world's nuclear arsenals, a seemingly highly paradoxical move for a villain, but in doing so he undermines the decade-old logic that nuclear weapons allegedly create a more stable world, while he himself claims to want to create a "better world." Ultron claims to have the mission to create "peace in our time" at the beginning of the film. Ultimately, both aim to change, annihilate, and eradicate what is essentially presented as human nature. The violence inherent in the actions of the villains is one issue, the lives they are eager to sacrifice marks them as uncompromisingly evil; but their constant conflict with values such as individualism, freedom, and liberty cherished by Americans but despised by the villains expresses the necessity to defend these values from any attack, no matter what the alternative would look like. The motives of the villains could potentially open up interesting and substantial questions about life and death against the backdrop of super-powered individuals and existential threat. But the option for a *better world*, exclusively expressed by the villains, remains untouched and unattainable as a result of their violent and rogue behaviour.

*Doctor Strange* creates a more complex picture while at the same trying to combine features of the action film genre and the *Star Wars* films with more orientalist tropes. The villain, Kaecilius, and his acolytes try to attract the demon Dormammu, who inhabits the timeless Dark Dimension, to come and assimilate earth and our universe. Their motivation is not for everyone to die but to live on forever in

the Dark Dimension, although Kaecilius and Strange repeatedly display philosophical differences about exactly how this life would look like. However, in an interesting juxtaposition between existence in the Dark Dimension and life how it is tangible for the audience, the film insists on life and death as standing in harmony. The Ancient One tells Strange shortly before her death: “Death gives life meaning.” Interestingly, the existential threat radiates from the danger for a specific set of values and an idealised image of human life. This is not dissimilar from the way we conceptualise terrorism. As Baudrillard argues: “Admittedly, in terms of our system of values, they are cheating. It is not playing fair to throw one’s death into the game. But this does not trouble them, and the new rules are not ours to determine” (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 23). The task for the superheroes in these films becomes incredibly complex suddenly, as they do not only have to repel any attempt by the villains to harm bodies but, furthermore, to defend American values themselves.

Remember, as much as ‘9/11’ became an event that involved death it was also seen as an attack on ‘our values.’, at least by the telling of prominent politicians at the time. As George W. Bush poignantly said in a Joint Session of Congress on September 20, 2001: “These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us because we stand in their way” (Bush, 2001a). The ending of a way of life – clearly meaning an American one – is positioned synonymously with death itself. What is also communicated here is the unrelenting conviction that the US would stand in the way of evil. A call that is reiterated in 2014 by the American historian Robert Kagan, arguing for a more active role in Obama’s foreign policy ambitions in his opinion piece “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire” (Kagan, 2014). One could argue, neither do superheroes. Especially not American ones. This of course has a longer tradition within American thinking, expressed by Ronald Reagan in 1983 during his ‘Evil Empire’ speech, quoting a man he had allegedly met a few years ago: “I would rather see my little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God” (Reagan, 1983). The terroristic act then becomes bigger, symbolically, politically, and sociologically, than the actual death it causes, and so does the destruction that evil villains on the screen might achieve. For Zulaika and Douglass, this can be explained since “regarding terrorism the ‘real’ is to a great extent ‘narrative.’ Such ‘unreality’ derives from the very logic of terror, its semantics of play and threat, its deceptive use of sign and symbol, its enormous power for collective representation” (1996, p. 92).

Obama’s unwavering dedication to counter-terrorism and the insistence on American values remained very much intact, which enabled the presence of different discursive elements in both popular culture and foreign policy. Consequently, in the MCU Phase II films, fear of the state and the state monopoly of violence is combined with the rejection of community. That is to say that we can see a return to

mythological tropes which exacerbate a deep suspicion towards the state and emphasise a radical form of individualism. Obama's foreign policy, built on traditional mythological American fears of the state and community vs a deep exacerbation of individualism, then reflects this return to violence; first, as the only solution to transformational or destructive advances of the villains; second, as an instrument by an empowered individual (typically found and mythologically-heightened in the lone hero of the frontier); and, therefore, as an inherently positive feature of national identity and security.

### The superhero at the Frontier

This section addresses how the engagement of Obama and the superhero films with the issue of security and threat during that time embrace and highlight violence and reconnect it with its mythical roots. That is to say that the Frontier experience and its underlying mythologisation of specific American values leave the use of violence and force uncritically intact while, as we have seen above, both Obama and this era's superhero films are more interested in changing the way that violence is used and how it might be legitimised. But this return to mythological tropes does not only apply to the US; what becomes clear is that discourses on targeted killing and drone warfare are increasingly connected to effects of globalisation (Agwu, 2018) and play into the infinite continuation of the 'War on Terror'. Even more so, '9/11' and the 'War on Terror' as a cultural, aesthetic, and global experience produced these events as global experience. The global circulation of security issues and threats (Weber & Lacy, 2011) and the global circulation of specific cultural artefacts (Adelman, 2013) – especially Hollywood films and Marvel and DC characters – then go hand in hand. In this way, the American experiences of threat, violence, and the Frontier become part of a globalisation, leading into what I call a global frontier against terrorism. Instead of questioning the logic of violence as solution to securitised issues (Buzan et al., 1998) we are confronted with a paradoxical situation in which violence becomes inevitable and at the same time futile. This is then expressed by an increased polarisation and fragmentation of the American nation.

As already discussed in Chapter 2, superheroes nostalgically flirt with myths inherent in American identity, reconnecting with the Frontier, Cowboys, and gunslinging violence. That is to say that vigilantism, individualism, and heroism are being negotiated in a specific way, given that the infinite 'War on Terror' and Obama's deepening of the militarised narrative around it are expressed in a specific way in the films. The changing nature of the vigilante has been analysed by Slotkin:

However, both the urban vigilante and the horror/slasher genres invert the Myth of the Frontier that had informed the Western. The borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment, if anything, the flow of aggressive power runs the opposite direction, with the civilized world threatened with subjugation to or colonization by the forces of darkness (1992, p. 635).



This return to one of the archmyths of American identity then becomes one that distances itself from the aggressive use of violence and the problematic history regarding the native population, while framing the Frontier experiences as something that becomes defensive and aims to preserve rather than transform. At the same time, this textual reframing transcends the trauma of '9/11' and positions the 'War on Terror' as based in said mythical tropes since the frontier thesis "is not about a foundational point or a historical origin understood in the sense of linear time, but it describes a set of processes that transform people from a banal identity to one spectacular and valued" (Dittmer, 2013, pp. 65-66).

The Obama presidency, carried by his charisma and rhetoric, has then also reiterated and reinforced an assumed overarching Americanness over contemporary issues and thus managed to dehistoricise and decontextualise them. His emphasis on diplomacy rather than unilaterally exercising force did ultimately little to change the nature of the 'War on Terror'. In the superhero films, the way of conflict resolution through violence does not change either but is rather connected to mythologised spaces within the broader Frontier discourse.

What the films show then are two ways in which the Frontier and its relationship with violence take place, this is the urban and the rural space. The home is then also emotionally bound to the concept of the nation, in this sense the "home is a (feminised) place in which to dwell and must be left in order to engage with the wider world, after which it is returned to once more" (Edensor, 2002, p. 61). Following Slotkin's argument above, superhero films also position their characters within urban spaces as civilised worlds, on the one hand expressing a deep anxiety of the innocent city falling victim to foreign, malicious influences (an even more comprehensive image in the post-'9/11' world) and on the other hand it is the city that becomes a securitised space. Violence is then removed from rural spaces. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* the Avengers seek refuge from Ultron in Hawkeye's Homestead in Missouri. Throughout the later Avengers films Hawkeye helps the film produce a conservative vision of American identity by connecting tropes of rural harmony, peacefulness, and the nuclear family. This is juxtaposed with Captain America's vision, who repeatedly reiterates that he is "just a kid from Brooklyn." The bond between Captain America and the New York City borough goes so far that a real-life statue of Captain America was unveiled in a park in August 2016 (F. Garcia, 2016). But also Superman in *Man of Steel* expresses his relationship to the Frontier best in his conversation with General Swanwick:

Swanwick: Then I'll ask the obvious question. How do we know you won't one day act against America's interests?

Superman: I grew up in Kansas, General. I'm about as American as it gets. Look, I'm here to help. But it has to be on my own terms. And you have to convince Washington of that.

The tautological reference to Kansas does not require any more scrutiny, the fact that the superheroic protagonist is connected to both the American countryside and the city makes him reliable and

relatable. At the same time, the reference to Washington, DC shifts any problem away from America itself to a vague notion of a political elite. This juxtaposition between the rural Western space from which violence is shifted to the East and the Eastern city is crucial as it reinforces Slotkin's point that the Frontier experience can be inverted. The city is more often than not clearly identifiable as New York, which faces a lot of destruction. For a variety of observers, the link between films such as *Man of Steel* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and an evocation of '9/11' was more than obvious (Buchanan, 2013; Collinson, 2013; Hoffman, 2014). In the director's commentary for *Ultron*, director Joss Whedon explained: "Even now, many years later, the last thing we want to do is egregiously evoke the specter of 9/11. Being callous about that is unthinkable" (quoted in McSweeney, 2018, p. 119). What makes the films so complex then is that they constantly reinforce '9/11' without being explicit about it. But in this way, the inverted Frontier remains similarly mythological, violent and deadly, fighting off evil over and over again.

But despite the films developing American narratives and focusing on American spaces as the ones where the future of civilisation is decided, the emphasis lies on civilisation and not America. That is to say that, not for the first time, in an exacerbated way the US and their superheroes fight their battle on behalf of humanity, and in this sense reflect the benign metanarrative of US foreign policy. As discussed above, since death and the loss of values such as individualism, liberty, and freedom are synonymous, the protection of said values becomes a global affair. In one of the last scenes of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* the villain Ultron and Vision, a powerful superhero created by Tony Stark, move away from questions of nationality to question of humanity:

Vision: You're afraid.  
 Ultron: Of you?  
 Vision: Of death. You're the last one.  
 Ultron: You were supposed to be the last. Stark asked for a savior and settled for a slave.  
 Vision: I suppose we are both disappointments.  
 Ultron: I suppose we are.  
 Vision: Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites and...try to control what won't be. But there is grace in their failings. I think you missed that.  
 Ultron: They're doomed.  
 Vision: Yes. But a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts. It is a privilege to be among them.

Without specifically addressing Vision's reasoning against Ultron's regarding the grace of human conduct or how this privilege looks like, Vision mythologises human nature through the prism of American culture and identity. The issues that are experienced by America, the threat of Ultron, General Zod, or Dormammu become globalised – indeed the final battle with Ultron takes place not in America, but in the fictional East European state of Sokovia. Their global nature also applies to the way these films are internationally distributed and marketised and discursively established.

The streamlined and highly successful productions of the MCU from 2008 and the DCEU from 2013 as well as the periodical X-Men and Spider-Man films illustrate how they carefully and self-consciously tried to navigate between American exceptionalism and globalised markets. One example of this is the development of Superman. In 2011, in DC's Action Comics #900, Superman renounces his American citizenship in front of the UN as he aims to understand himself as a citizen of the world. He breaks with his classical line "Truth, Justice and the American way" by adding that "it's not enough anymore" (Hudson, 2011). This, of course, did not pass by political commentators, as one Republican Party activist was quoted on the conservative TV station Fox News: "Besides being riddled with a blatant lack of patriotism, and respect for our country, Superman's current creators are belittling the United States as a whole. By denouncing his citizenship, Superman becomes an eerie metaphor for the current economic and power status the country holds worldwide" (H. McKay, 2011). Adding to this, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee would see this issue as "part of a bigger trend of Americans almost apologizing for being American" (Weldon, 2013). Lastly, adding to the conservative outrage, author Johnathan Last simply said: "If Superman doesn't believe in America, then he doesn't believe in anything" (Batty, 2011). Interestingly, this criticism speaks to both the national divide and the relationship with the rest of the world. It also criticises the creators, not for the first time, as unpatriotic and unamerican while not reflecting upon Superman himself. The comic book writers Chuck Dixon and Paul Rivoche call the issue "perhaps the most dramatic example of modern comics' descent into political correctness, moral ambiguity and leftist ideology" (C. Dixon & Rivoche, 2014). These comments reveal that the targets for the conservative attacks are the creators behind issue #900. At the same time Superman as a character remains untouchable. Decades of mythologising Superman as all-American make him move beyond any criticism. That Superman never really goes through with his plan to renounce his citizenship is clearly lost on conservative commentators, many of whom perhaps did not actually read the comic book they were criticising, as well as the fact that Superman had been granted citizenship by every member-state of the UN in a storyline from 1974 (Batty, 2011). It furthermore highlights how crucial it is to hold on to the 'American' in American superheroes, clearly transcending the realm of mere entertainment and becoming a crucial marker for US identity and foreign policy.

However, this is not the first or last time a superhero expresses an ambivalent relationship with the US. For example, Captain America transforms into the Nomad, the man without country, in the 1970s and becomes The Captain, a stateless shadow of himself, while also dying in a comic book arc running from 2007-2008. Death and identity crises are a constant feature in superhero stories (Dittmer, 2013; Mondello, 1976; Wright, 2001) and are constantly corrected and retold to fit into ever more complicated continuity, aka retconned. What Soares then analyses is that despite the constant reiterations of the ties between superheroes, American identity, and American spaces, "Man of Steel

grapples with these tensions with the globalization of Superman in ways which are both meant to respect the last seventy-five years of Superman mythology and simultaneously break with them to 'reboot' the character for a twenty-first century, post-9/11 audience" (Soares, 2015, p. 755). This does not only apply to Superman and the DCEU reboot of 2013 alone but to essentially all the superhero productions, desperate to appeal to a global audience.

Within the text, films such as *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, or *Doctor Strange* present security issues more as a matter of the world and/or humanity as such, not unprecedented in popular culture but reinvigorated during the Obama years, paralleling his approach to foreign policy. However, an interesting example of a nod to international audiences occurs in *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. In the first scene, we see Steve Rogers working on a to-do list of things to catch up on, including ten items covering political and cultural events. In the American version this includes *I Love Lucy*, the Moon Landing, the Berlin Wall (Up and Down), Steve Jobs (Apple), Disco, Thai Food, Star Wars/Trek, Nirvana (Band), Rocky (Rocky II), and Troubleman (soundtrack). While the last five items remain unchanged (due to technical reasons), the first five were adapted to appeal to international audiences, with the first five items replaced by specific national/regional ones in the UK and Ireland, South Korea, Spain, Latin America, Italy, Australia and New Zealand, Russia, France, Brazil, and Germany (Chan, 2014). In this way, Captain America and his conceptualisation of history become extended by being connected with other national narratives and markets. It might seem paradoxical that it is precisely Captain America who performs this globalised turn, but given Obama's turn to 'leading from behind' (Löfflmann, 2017) this makes more sense coming from Cap than anyone else.

What we can see then is that there are different narratives and tropes that very much apply to American myths and America's origin story (however vague that may be formulated) but, furthermore, that they have been made global through a smart combination of creating comprehensive, identifiable, and likeable cinematic products that also spill over into other markets (video games, comic books, merchandise etc) while successfully connecting to traditional cultural artefacts and contemporary foreign policy issues. In this sense, they make superheroes a global phenomenon in the same way that the 'War on Terror' was launched on a global scale.

Rather than putting an end to the 'War on Terror', Obama's presidency perpetuated it even further (McCracken, 2014). Jackson likens the conflict to the film *Groundhog Day* (R. Jackson, 2015a) that is to say a repetition of events, day in and day out, without the possibility to escape or change. In this sense "the United States really does remain stuck in an existential counterterrorism loop in which the same essential approach continues to be enacted over and over again, even when its most obvious result is to produce more and even worse terrorism, such as the mutation of Al Qaida into IS [Islamic State]" (R.

Jackson & Tsui, 2017, p. 80). Especially the unbroken continuation of violence and the massive increase of a targeted killing machinery as main tools of counter-terrorism policy created the perfect environment for making the 'War on Terror' infinite (Boyle, 2013; Fuller, 2017; McCrisken, 2013). At the same time, Obama's eight years in the White House and his continuous attempt to rebuild international alliances also gave his foreign policy the appearance of a more globally oriented one (Ledwidge, 2014).

That is to say that in line with what had started under Bush, America's foreign policy still remained very much determined by the aftermath of the '9/11' attacks, but in a dehistoricised way since '9/11' is constantly politically and culturally invoked and used as an origin myth while at the same time removed from any political context. This can also be observed when looking at how the presidents had engaged with terrorism. Both had lists of 'bad guys' to kill off, apparently not reflecting on the fact that once one disappeared another would immediately fill the gap, like Hydra in Greek mythology (or the Marvel comics and films). In this sense, the pivot from al Qaida and bin Laden to ISIS half-way through Obama's second term would exacerbate this point.

In April 2016, Obama again drew on the world of superheroes and supervillains to put across his view of how terrifying the threat was from IS, or what he referred to as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant): "ISIL is the Joker. It has the capacity to set the whole region on fire" (J. Goldberg, 2016). This almost verbatim reflects the words of Alfred Pennyworth in *The Dark Knight* when he tells Bruce Wayne about a bandit he tried to catch in his younger days. Confronted with the motive of said bandit, Alfred states profoundly: "Some men just wanna watch the world burn." Obama directly comparing the threat of Islamic State to the terror wrought in *The Dark Knight* by the Joker demonstrates the degree to which superhero discourses have entered the cultural and political lexicon of America. As with his direct references to Iron Man earlier, Obama's invocation of characters from the Marvel and DC universes needed no further explanation. His audience understood the references since the complex battles between good and evil in the comic books and the movies have become so ubiquitous in American culture. For the US president to reference Marvel and DC signifies the extent to which the co-constitutive nature of superhero narratives has become embedded in American society and US security discourses.

While it might seem that the Joker only wants chaos as the ends and the means, he presents a complex counter-narrative to neo-liberal structures of capitalist reproduction, similar maybe to Tyler Durden, the schizophrenic invention of the protagonist in *Fight Club* (1999). Bruce as Batman then acts against the Joker in the same way that Alfred outlined, namely through violence and force, just as Obama would be convinced to confront IS with force. At the same time, the reference to Batman is comprehensible

for a wide range of American and non-American audiences. It does furthermore simplify the complexities that terroristic violence is based on and removes the line between reality and fiction intentionally. As Fermor analyses, the broadening of the 'War on Terror' was then undertaken, among other features, by extending the fight of good vs evil and making it a fight between civilisation and barbarism. In this way "the self was broadened to enable international collaboration and the other was narrowed and dehumanised, making the physical destruction of Obama's chosen targets a political necessity"(2017, p. 84).

The superhero films then helped position America as the centre of civilised values while retaining a relationship with the (civilised) rest of the world. As I have shown before, the films manage very well to connect post-'9/11' tropes with the Frontier mythology. In this sense, however, they do not only present a dehistoricised version of US foreign policy and threat but extend the Frontier globally. Consequently, the 'War on Terror' remains global as well in the way that security and surveillance are negotiated but, furthermore, in the way that in its infinite nature it becomes unsolvable, a tragic circumstance that becomes a global reality. The superheroic characters are then quite good at fending off threat after threat but seem incapable of solving deeper structural issues or of reflecting about what produces the violence that they themselves then resist with violent means. What I diagnose then is that the endemic paradoxes of counter-terrorism and the futility of the violence that the global war is fought with leads to a crisis within the American national narrative and increase the polarised split that started to fragment the American nation.

### *Civil War, the clash of values, and the 50% nation*

The variety of superhero texts during the second Obama term and leading into the presidential election campaign of 2016 was negotiating American national identity in a globalised context along racialised and gendered lines, bringing in more diversity and aspects of team-work and solidarity to the debate (Mulder, 2017). At the same time, the filmic texts experience an increased distribution and circulate on a variety of media all over the world, not only in comic books and on cinema screens anymore but increasingly on social media and in video games, next to other merchandise. When Obama took office in January 2009, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook were only a few years old and mobile devices were not omnipresent yet. This is important because the large extent to which superheroic and cinematic texts are negotiated, discussed, and circulated had only started during the Obama years, almost logically leading to the presidency of President Trump and his excessive use of Twitter.

However, in the last stretches of the Obama presidency the unresolved political issues, the unbroken sense of insecurity and endemic crisis coincided with the presidential election campaign of Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump, exemplifying the shift into (or the continuation of) an existential crisis in

American national identity. The unchanged nature of the 'War on Terror' and the self-conscious conservation of militarised violence was then also displayed within the superhero genre, most prominently playing out in *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Captain America: Civil War*, both of which came out between March and April 2016. Additionally, the differences between Trump and Clinton were seen by many voters, international audiences, and different media as a clash of values in the sense that they allegedly displayed two different versions of what America should be about.

The film *Captain America: Civil War* sets forth a trend that had started with its prequels, namely an increased polarisation between the Avengers along the lines of vaguely defined value systems and the question of the use of violence in the post-'9/11' era (Gruenewald, 2018; McSweeney, 2018). The film speaks to both the immediate split in America between those who condoned Bush's 'War on Terror' and those who did not. Despite Obama's reconciliatory rhetoric the polarisation of American politics could not be fixed, culminating in the election of Trump. The original comic book *Civil War* running between 2006-2007 on which the film is loosely based provides a reflection on the policies of the Bush administration that oscillates between security and freedom as dichotomous opposites (Packard, 2011). As Costello then argues: "The memory of 9/11 offered in superhero comics does not affirm a nationalist mission, but produces anxiety in the definition of an American self, an American hero, and an American mission" (M. J. Costello, 2011, p. 42).

It is only logical then that *Captain America: Civil War* asks similar questions, juxtaposing two different views on creating security. The issue that is presented is whether superheroes should come under governmental supervision and control, in the film displayed by the so-called Sokovia accords. Iron Man and some of the other Avengers are strongly in favour of governmental control with the United Nations as umbrella organisation while Captain America and the team members siding with him refuse with reference to the dangers of governmental oversight. The theatrical poster of the film visually split the Avengers into two camps and asked, using the slogan from the comic book original, "Whose side are you on?" (Packard, 2011). This slogan was used in some online videos and adapted to make the civil war as one between Clinton and Trump. Most interestingly, the late-night US talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live* produced a fake movie trailer with a fighting scene from the film as being between presidential hopefuls Trump, Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Ben Carson (Verhoeven, 2016). The name of the storyline, *Civil War* gives a sense of the *real* political situation within the US and was obvious to many. In the middle of the film, the split between Captain America and Iron Man is finally fulfilled:

Iron Man: I'm trying to keep you from tearing the Avengers apart.  
Captain America: You did that when you signed.

On balance, the film slightly takes the side of Captain America as his earlier suspicion of the state (and thus governmental control) is again reconfirmed and Iron Man's belief in such controlling measures

does not really stand up to scrutiny. Again, the films and their protagonists share a deep suspicion towards the state with Washington, DC as a space occupied by suspect elites and corrupt politicians (much like Trump's image of the need to "drain the swamp"), although the film offers no direct critical engagement with America or Americans per se. After all, for the overarching belief in *Frontier* to be maintained, its violence without state interference has to remain intact. In the end, however, Captain America must evade and flee, leaving his shield behind, symbolically losing his weapon and means of protection. Obama himself left the political stage and disappeared for almost all of Trump's first term, holding up the tradition of former presidents who meddle very little if at all with the affairs of their successors.

The DC film *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* parallels the debate in *Captain America: Civil War* in the sense that for the first part of the film, the use of violence, legality, and accountability are core to the plot. The discussion about vigilantism is foregrounded at the beginning in this dialogue between Superman and Batman's alter egos, Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne:

Clark: He thinks he's above the law.

Bruce: The Daily Planet criticizing those who think they're above the laws. A little hypocritical, wouldn't you say, considering every time your hero saves a cat out of a tree, you write a puff piece editorial, about an alien who if he wanted to, could burn the whole place down. There wouldn't be a damn thing we can do to stop him.

Clark: Most of the world doesn't share your opinion, Mr Wayne.

Bruce: Maybe it's the...Gotham City and me, we just have a bad history with freaks dressed like clowns.

The different understandings of how justice and security can be achieved and what freedom means to a society are fiercely and violently discussed in the film before Batman and Superman eventually join forces against a greater threat in the form of Doomsday as well as Lex Luthor. Crucially it takes the intervention of Wonder Woman to transcend the testosterone and bring the caped crusader and the man of steel into a unified stance and ultimate victory against Doomsday. Both films, however, share a sense in the end that the conflict remains unresolved, as much as the domestic fight between Democrats and Republicans is raging on at this point. They furthermore leave us with the knowledge that a far bigger threat is on its way, a threat that leaves the only common denominator – the use of violence and force – intact. In this sense, they help to perpetuate the 'War on Terror' by insisting on what they have always insisted on, namely that the fight against evil will go on and on. On the cinematic front, the Obama presidency ended on the sour note that the endemic crisis that is the post-'9/11' world and its violent issues remain unchanged. Ultimately, the US remained trapped in contradictory logics and dynamics, epitomised by McSweeney's analysis of *Captain America: Civil War* which could also be extended to other films of the genre:



In *Captain America: Civil War*, a film which challenges some of the central tenets of the genre, *Black Widow* asks Captain America, 'Do you really want to punch your way out of this?', ostensibly suggesting that diplomacy might be worth pursuing, only to reveal that violence seems to be, once again, the only answer to his dilemmas in the way that both the genre, and the culture which produced it, demands. (2018, p. 26)

This situation reflects the end of the Obama years, which left us as much as Captain America has left the scene at the end of the film. This means that while "the heroic past of Captain America remains a fixture in the country's popular imagination, his future purpose and role seem unclear" (Löfflmann, 2017, pp. 59-60). As Jason Dittmer has pointed out regarding the many changes of Captain America over time, now applied to his standing within the MCU as of 2016: "If Captain America is increasingly unable to circulate in the news media as an unproblematic icon of the United States (as demonstrated in the transition from Truth's coverage to the later episodes), then the ontological status of a singular nation-state is implicitly called into question" (2012, p. 154)

## Conclusion

The election of Donald Trump as US President in November 2016 seems now like a temporary escalation point at which the US and its foreign policy were finally sliding into a long-awaited crisis. But as I have argued this had started a lot earlier. As journalist Mark Landler put it: "Obama had tapped into something more profound than mere war weariness: He was reflecting a country, a decade into the twenty-first century, that had lost its rationale for playing the global policeman, for carrying the world, Atlas-like, on its shoulders" (Landler, 2016, p. 347). The impression that the US had lost its rationale is surely a revealing one. This seemed to potentially change immediately at the beginning of the 'War on Terror' but did not last long. On the contrary, it created and exacerbated a crisis that could not be stopped. In his assessment of the counter-terrorism policies of Bush and Obama, Jackson diagnoses, first, the futility of these measures and, second, an increasing conflation between reality and fiction during the course of the 'War on Terror' that cannot be rectified. He argues that "we are likely to see further attempts to institutionalise imagination in counterterrorism practice, and therefore, more and more examples of fantasy thinking. Bizarre forms of counterterrorism thought and practice will likely become the norm, rather than the exception" (2015b, p. 50).

The films of the second term of Obama's presidency critically engage with his 'War on Terror' as his promises to end it broke down one by one. This culminates in a new crisis within America throughout which it becomes clear yet again that while its values and its way of life seem constantly at stake, there is no way out of the predicaments that they had gotten themselves into after '9/11'. This also leads to a question of purpose, where America wants to move from here and how they can move forward. This leads to three crucial points. First, the films develop a critique of the political establishment and engage anxiously with any form of control, something very topical during the surveillance and drone debates in Obama's second term. The critique, however, is addressing specific features within the American

system but never questions America or their superheroes themselves. Second, the increasingly more complex narratives open the way for a more systemic critique in the form of sophisticatedly drawn villains. Ultimately, the superheroes remain morally and factually victorious, even if just for a short period of time, undermining any deeper discussion on the way US foreign policy should be conducted from here. On the contrary as, third, the reproduction of myths such as the Frontier and the Frontier vigilante perpetuate the 'War on Terror' just as Obama could not escape the logics of his own and his predecessor. His presidency was yet another sequel, leading into the next big crisis: The presidency of Donald J Trump.

## Chapter 6 – Trump I and total crisis

### Introduction

This chapter aims to illustrate the shift from Obama to Trump and the intensification of national, existential crisis that characterises the first term of President Trump. The endpoint for the chapter will be 2019 because the most recent superhero films came out in summer and fall of that year with *Spider-Man: Far From Home* and *Joker*. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in February-March 2020, shortly after Trump survived his impeachment trial, and the US started to decline into relative chaos as infections and deaths rose to a higher level than any other country, the economy tanked, and street protests spread across the country as a reaction against police brutality and structural racism, all in the build-up to the 2020 presidential election. The pandemic also put an end to new superhero releases, with DC's *Birds of Prey* being the last one to make it to the cinema in February before screens went dark globally. Marvel's *New Mutants* coincided with the socially distanced reopening of cinemas in September while other major productions such as *Black Widow* and *Wonder Woman 1984* were postponed into late summer, then winter and eventually 2021 due to the pandemic. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the first term of the Trump presidency up to 2020 and the superhero film releases of that time. First, I will address how the Trump presidency ushered in a new period of crisis.

Superhero films helped to intensify the crisis expressed and catalysed by the election of Trump in a dehistoricised and depoliticised manner. The first term of the Trump presidency falls neatly together with the end of Phase Three of the MCU which produced almost as many films in this phase as in the first two. The two Spider-Man films of 2017 and 2019 were co-produced by Sony and Marvel, making them finally a part of the MCU which they had been separated from before. Fox and its properties such as the X-Men and Deadpool were also acquired by Disney in early 2019. Commercially, these films as well as some of the DCEU continued to be highly successful.

In order to show the role superhero films played during the first term of Trump, I will focus on five main points. First, I will show how the rise of Trump and his campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again' did not directly cause a new crisis within American identity and culture but rather displayed a focal point for what many observers already perceived as an existential crisis in American identity. I argue that this crisis did not emerge from nothing but is more an expression of the strong polarisation of the US that had been building for years. At the same time, the election campaign and the presidency were built on fantastical, nostalgic notions of American history, against the backdrop of a global wave of right-wing populism, making permanent and total 'emergency' the new normal. All of this culminates in the question of who and what America is, and which values it is built upon, as seen previously engaged with in *Captain America: Civil War*. Second, I will show how superhero films seemingly develop a counter-

narrative against the increasingly authoritarian definition of Americanness on the political right in the MAGA era. The genre's diversification, with its ostensible commitment to liberal values, and emphasis on togetherness makes the genre a perfect signifier for liberal values while not losing anything of its inherently conservative features, opening up the genre for audiences across political camps and continents. Third, the Trump presidency, the unbroken issue of international terrorism, and the increasing tensions between a variety of countries with the US are ultimately embedding this existential struggle within American culture. Almost every political question becomes a matter of life or death. At the same time, tensions between Trump and North Korea and Iran brought back the issue of nuclear anxiety and mass death, very much underscored by *Justice League* and the two Avengers films *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Fourth, the end of Phase Three of the MCU also brings a symbolic end to antiquated, obsolete representations of US foreign policy and tries to reinvent the superhero in a post-war world (that is to say that the MCU world *after the war* parallels the *real* US and their 'War on Terror'). After *Infinity War* and *Endgame* and the ultimate battle for the universe, Iron Man and Captain America stories are complete, pivoting towards a more liberal, cosmopolitan, and youthful Spider-Man in the last film of the series, *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, as a juxtaposition to the authoritarian Trump presidency. Lastly, I argue that the Trump presidency asks the very inconvenient question of who superheroes actually belong to (or what America's soul actually is). Given how inherently tied superheroes are to American national identity and foreign policy, this question becomes an existential one and a crucial site for political and cultural battles.

### The Trumpian crisis and permanent alarmism

As we have seen throughout the different presidencies so far, crisis is not a new phenomenon but, on the contrary, a founding condition of the American nation (Croft, 2006). At the same time, the election of Trump conveyed something that seemed new to many Americans and international experts, in the way that the election 2016 was fought – such was Trump's inflammatory, divisive rhetoric, debates about immigration, healthcare, gun control, etc., or the fact that social media played an even more important role than in previous campaigns. Some have argued that the election of Trump was causing a new crisis, increasing polarisation, and implementing authoritarianism in the American political system (Kellner, 2016; D. McKay, 2020). And while there are some novel aspects to the Trump presidency, I would rather argue that Trump should be considered a symptom of a variety of reasons, most predominantly the global rise of populism, the endemic crisis of the 'War on Terror', and pre-existing structures within American political culture and the American system. The assumed battle for American values does not find its origin with Trump but rather expresses a certain desire or feeling of insecurity, not original but exacerbated through events such as '9/11', the financial crisis, and now Trump. The battle for American values always has an existential dimension (Baker, 2006; Croft, 2006)

which is then not surprisingly rerouted in the question about American mythology and the search for viable narratives. Engelhardt, for example, sees Trump as a direct consequence of the Bush administration and their 'War on Terror' (Engelhardt, 2018) and the specific logics in foreign policy deriving from there. Starr-Deelen equally sees a continuity in the 'War on Terror' from Bush to Trump, arguing:

The narrative is reminiscent of the George W. Bush administration when it declared a real war (and not a rhetoric alone) against terror after the 9/11 attacks. Taken to an extreme, the war vocabulary and military terminology imply that battlefield solutions are the only appropriate ones. In addition, relying on the war narrative to explain the campaign against ISIS and al Qaeda may be counterproductive in that it implies the military is the most important counterterrorism tool and it insinuates that there will be a definitive end one day, like the world wars (2018, p. 47).

Some have then argued that rather than displaying a completely new direction in US foreign policy, Trump's presidency – stripped of the crude rhetoric and confused tweets – resembles more the 'peace through strength' approach of Ronald Reagan (Herbert, McCrisken, & Wroe, 2019). Wolin analyses the dynamic of looking back in time to a vague, not clearly defined but glorious past as a key strategy for Reagan and the way he fought his conservative culture war (Wolin, 2008). He talks about a totalitarian American system in the sense of one that is "seemingly one driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on 'private' media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events" (Wolin, 2008, p. 44). Ultimately, the Trump presidency (equally to other crises in American national identity discourses) did not come out of the blue. The situation Americans and the world were confronted with from 2016 onwards is then rooted in American mythology and the inescapable 'War on Terror'.

Ultimately this is an important point to consider for the rest of this chapter as the crisis that became ever more prevalent and evoked a sense of urgency because of the Trump election does not mean that the crisis started with him. The fragmentation of American society, the polarisation of political camps, the perceived collapse of values, principles, and identities were already present before Trump came along. The rise of a figure like Trump can also be attributed to a combination of post-modern anxiety and neo-liberal discourses of leadership. In his analysis of neo-liberal capitalism and society, Conolly argues that especially in the US the fragility of societal structures produces the socio-economic base for what Trump would later embody:

Corporate elites, sports heroes, financial wizards, and military leaders project images of independence, mastery, and virility that can make them attractive models of identification, whereas state welfare programs, market regulations, retirement schemes, and health care, while essential to life, may remind too many of the very fragilities, vulnerabilities, susceptibilities, and dependencies they strive to deny or forget (2013, p. 24)

For many Americans, Trump symbolised precisely this form of political leadership that is built on the securitisation of a variety of issues such as migration or the deep state and elites. The combination of various volatile crisis experiences then leads to the hyperidentification with figures that Conolly calls neo-liberal heroes (Conolly, 2008, 2013). Interestingly, the figures that are successfully heroised do not have to be real in order to be taken as role models (Connell, 2005), and if they are real then they are still to some degree embedded in myth-making, like athletes, soldiers, or business tycoons such as Trump. This also ties back to the focus (or obsession) of American culture with individual heroes.

The crisis of the Trump presidency is then more a logical continuation of the permanence of emergency and looming apocalypse that has accompanied American politics, in one form or another, since '9/11' and finds its roots in eschatological myths of the American nation. While Bush formulated the 'War on Terror' as a Manichean battle for the future of civilisational survival, Obama finalised the militarised logic of security and survival into infinite war. Trump's presidency would now work as the ultimate proof that the apocalypse is coming and transform foreign policy and security discourses into permanent alarmism. In this sense, Trump expresses an existential crisis to American national identity for both sides of the political spectrum as Trump is either a saviour figure fighting everything evil and hellish or an authoritarian would-be dictator.

On the cinematic side of things, DC and Marvel came to the finale of their respective story arcs. For DC this was the bringing together of the *Justice League* while Marvel's climax not only to Phase Three but also the whole Infinity Saga was the epic *Avengers: Endgame* followed by the more light-hearted *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. DC's production follows the team narrative that the MCU had already put in place years before. As also seen in *Endgame*, the threats that the superheroes have to face are not only of American or global but of universal dimensions. From the reboot of the superhero genre during the Bush administration, the focus on origin stories of individual characters or superhero teams dominated the Obama years. As the genre became bigger and bigger, the storylines became a repetitive alternation between origin stories and apocalyptic end of days battles. To some extent, this underscores the development that "these end-of-the-world scenarios reveal how one of the pervasive elements of neoliberalism is the false notion that we have indeed reached the end of history" (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 208). This underlines that the cinematic texts depoliticise and dehistoricise contemporary security and foreign policy discourses as the repetitive circle of escalation and only very temporary resolution without any final catharsis does not require any further explanation anymore and, thus, becomes contextless. Even *Endgame* has a sequel just two months after its release.

The existential nature of the threats displayed by Darkseid and Thanos in the films furthermore underscores the sentiment of the Trump presidency.<sup>4</sup> Had Obama put emphasis on conciliatory and diplomatic rhetoric and more or less successfully held up his image of a liberal state leader, Trump shifted discourses on international security and foreign policy into one of permanent conflict with domestic opposition as well as with NATO, China, the Muslim world, Russia, Iran, North Korea, the UNESCO, the WHO, etc. Issues such as the nuclear arms race, geopolitical conflicts, and even nuclear war were suddenly back on the table. This made the superheroic texts from 2016 onwards excellent carriers of the perceived global security crisis, especially given how Darkseid and Thanos are an existential threat for all of humanity, and in the case of Thanos to half the population of the entire universe. If the security crisis of US foreign policy is universal, so are the reoccurring threats presented to us. In the face of the emergence of a variety of newly elected state leaders around the world in countries such as Brazil, India, Great Britain, Italy and various smaller countries who were playing on heightened senses of nationalism and masculinity as well as the long-standing administrations in China, Russia and Israel gave superhero films the chance to position themselves as liberal texts without having to fear that they would lose too much of their audience.

### Superheroes as liberal counter-narratives?

As we have seen in previous chapters, superhero films have been highly successful in positioning themselves vis-à-vis specific political issues of different administrations and presidencies, vastly enhanced through the cinematic productions since '9/11'. They can carve out important political themes that are being received as affirmation or critique. With the films of the Trump era, there are some direct references to Trump, all of which are ironic or critical, but for the most part they appear as independent texts that allegedly create liberal tropes and diegeses which are easy to read against the backdrop of the Trump years.

The team narrative as a key feature of both Marvel and later DC productions is then facilitated by a broad diversification of the genre, the introduction of stand-alone films within the larger story arcs that not only feature most predominantly female and black superheroes, but those productions were also interpreted and read as specifically empowering and liberal texts. The films *Wonder Woman* by DC as well as *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, or *Ant-Man and the Wasp* on the side of the MCU presented female and black superheroic characters which, apart from the rather unsuccessful *Catwoman* and

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<sup>4</sup> The DCEU developed a storyline in which the members of the Justice League are confronted by a superpowered villain called Darkseid. The climactic ending of this saga has not occurred yet. On the other hand, the MCU developed the Infinity Saga based on a few comic book issues from the early 1990s which feature the villain Thanos fighting the members of the Avengers; all three MCU Phases are part of the Infinity Saga.

*Elektra*, had not been a focus of either the Marvel or DC cinematic universes up to this point. These productions were also woven into the bigger storylines of *Darkseid* and *Infinity War* but functioned as major texts to showcase the liberal, empowering side of both DC and Marvel in the context of the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements. The films were furthermore supported by an avalanche of TV shows that featured and drastically focused on issues of race and gender while having black or female title characters, such as *Jessica Jones* (since 2015), *Luke Cage* (since 2016), *Agent Carter* (2015-2016), *Supergirl* (since 2015), *Black Lightning* (since 2018), or *Batwoman* (since 2019).

The image that is presented to us then is one of liberating, emancipatory texts. Fitting to the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017, the United Nations made Wonder Woman the Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls in October 2016 (UN, 2016), underscoring the blurring of fact and fiction through the superhero genre. Furthermore, a variety of academic work has pointed out the subversive potential of Wonder Woman (Cocca, 2014; Coogan, 2018; Curtis & Cardo, 2018) also due to the long-standing tradition of the character, as well as black and migrant identities negotiated in texts such as *Black Panther* (Jeffrey A. Brown, 1999, 2001). But the films fit more into a neo-liberal framework of superficial emancipatory sentiment while maintaining the systemic issues that the films set out to address and criticise in the first place. Liberal critics of the films read the texts as highly empowering, maybe even subversively feminist and post-racial, seemingly underscoring the post-gender and post-colonial shift that had started with Obama (Abirafeh, 2017; T. Johnson, 2018; S. Lee, 2018; Mennecke, 2018; Siegel, 2017). While aspects of empowerment, suppression, and discrimination are surely present and partly negotiated in the films, the texts remain superficial in the way they engage with these issues and do not provide a form of broader systemic critique. As Robert Saunders points out in his analysis of *Black Panther*, while grappling in parts with geopolitical issues, colonialism, and slavery the film in “its openly-geopolitical engagement with such synthetic experiences of ‘Africa’ Disney-qua-MCU exposes itself to a critique of monetising black suffering on an international scale; however, such criticism has – so far – remained fairly muted outside the confines of academe” (2019, p. 147). Saunders reads *Black Panther* as part of the bigger Disney/MCU machinery which actively tries to profit from highly political issues without taking any political or historical systemic position. In this sense, they must remain conservative in their purview without wanting to risk alienating or lose any of their audiences.

As with most superhero films, the vision they develop is broadly depoliticised if the issues themselves are political. But interestingly *Black Panther* can very much be read, for example, as “a defining moment for Black America” (Wallace, 2018). On different sides of the debate, the film was also criticised as conservative or racist fantasy while the film was appropriated by alt-right groups, insisting that “Black Panther – despite a track-record of battling the Ku Klux Klan and white imperialists – promotes a list of conservative principles for his homeland, including: anti-immigration policies, strict trade restrictions



and ethno-nationalism” (Robert A. Saunders, 2019, p. 141). A variety of highly symbolic themes do occur in the film, such as secondary black, female characters such as Okoye or Shuri standing their ground also outside of the walls of Wakanda; or that Killmonger’s first appearance takes place in a museum where he insists on taking back what are rightfully African artefacts; or the last conversation between Killmonger and T’Challa at the end in which Killmonger, refusing to have his life saved, prefers to be buried “with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. Cause they knew death was better than bondage.” Ultimately, the film represents an American history with its own racial issues, especially against the backdrop of BlackLivesMatter. In the mid-credit scene, T’Challa insists on ending Wakandan isolationism while hitting out against notions very much used by Trump and his administration: “We all know the truth: More connects us than separates us. In times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.” This phrasing is crucial against the backdrop of Trump’s wall campaign on the US-Mexico border. All these features have multiple possible readings from different ideological positions which is also the strength of the text and the way it circulates through cinemas and wider audiences into the digital realm and the everyday.

Similarly, *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* showcase female superheroic characters during a time where MeToo, the Weinstein affair, and Trump’s locker-room rhetoric bring specific dynamics to debates on gender and sexism. It is entirely possible to read the films as empowering or feminist or liberal as they are smartly written texts that showcase what audiences are not used to seeing at the titular centre of superhero films, namely strong independent female heroes (Coyle, 2019; Z. Williams, 2017). In this line, *Wonder Woman* can then very much be described as “the perfect hero for the Trump era” (Godinez, 2017). Both productions follow up on films such as the rebooted *Ghostbusters* (2016) and *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (2017) both of which were deliberately targeted on social media and review websites such as [rottentomatoes.com](http://rottentomatoes.com) or [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) for featuring female heroes (Coyle, 2019). Some see the rise of more diverse superheroes as political comment on our times, for example by calling *Wonder Woman* a “tomboy superheroine designed for our PC [political correctness] times” (A. White, 2017). Others might criticise *Captain Marvel* for its lack of intersectionality (Abirafeh, 2017) or as proof that we actually live in a post-feminist world (Wilhelm, 2019).

These different readings illustrate how polysemic these texts still are which does not come as a surprise at this point, but it seems that in more polarising times, the reception of audiences also becomes more polarised. Donald Trump Jr. even resorted to Twitter to give his view on *Captain Marvel* shortly after its release in February 2019 by tweeting: “Love the concept for the new Marvel movie. Thoughts?” (Trump,

2019). Attached he tweeted a picture with the head of the *Triggered Feminist*<sup>5</sup> photoshopped over the body of Captain Marvel, titling “Captain Triggered”. Regardless of what is actually happening in the films, the nuances that they might open up or the actual (covert or open) political messages they might convey, conservatives read them basically a priori as proof of the liberal bias of Hollywood and big cultural producers such as DC and Marvel, and by extension Disney. On the other side of the political spectrum, the tendency goes to view these films as liberal versions of the superhero genre while celebrating as a welcome progression that they convey anti-racist, anti-sexist, and empowering messages.

However, the films might equally be seen as hardly anything more than a prolonged post-‘9/11’ reaction (Tait, 2019). In his review of *Captain Marvel*, Richard Brody argues that the film “offers a shallow vision of ethnic comity that even a Republican would have trouble arguing with [...] the forward-looking liberalism has a conservative core; it’s devised to extend the brand’s reach without alienating its base” (Brody, 2019a). This polysemic reading of the films coming out is – as we have seen so far – while not novel at all, does give the superhero genre a special function during this Trumpian crisis. Despite the way that these texts were being discussed as progressively feminist and post-racial texts, they remain shallow in their structure. This is to say that, as Brody writes, they are incredibly careful in pushing a specific, overt political agenda. In *Captain Marvel* the relationship between Carol Danvers and her best friend in the film, Maria Rambeau, sees a strong bond between them but this is hardly played out via their gender or the fact that Rambeau is black, thus remaining relatively uncritical towards the issue of race; but rather their relationship is tied to the broader scope of the military-industrial complex, that is to say that it plays almost exclusively off their comradeship as fighter pilots. In *Wonder Woman*, on the other hand, it is an American male soldier fighting in the European theatre of World War I who discovers the powerful but naïve Amazonian Princess Diana of Themyscira and takes her from her secluded, isolationist, utopian homeland into the *real* world of humankind. It is ultimately his sacrifice that enables Diana’s defeat of the villain Ares and her full becoming as Wonder Woman. So while these depictions might tackle some of the traditionalised notions of women in passive roles within military institutions (Cohn, 1987; Mathers, 2018; Tickner, 1992) or on cinema screens (Mulvey, 1999) the films are hardly transcending systemic issues.

*Captain Marvel* exaggerates the move to a dehistoricised, pure version of American heroism saturated with nostalgic references, similar to *Guardians of the Galaxy* with nostalgic musical cues, this time from the mid-1990s. The protagonist fulfils a variety of features familiar to audiences used to identifying

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<sup>5</sup> The meme allegedly shows a female, white, young college student with short hair and glasses who seems angry or outraged. It was first used by far-right pundit Alex Jones in one of many that is continuously used by conservative groups or individuals on social media in order to discredit left-wing or liberal views.

heroic trademarks: She is confident, witty, strong, and lawful. The film, however, remains stream-lined in accordance with the MCU's usual tropes that other male superheroic characters carry. Furthermore, the political and cultural *Top Gun* (1986) references that run through the whole film are immediately identifiable and comprehensive for everyone familiar with that earlier filmic vehicle for macho American heroism as embodied by Tom Cruise's Maverick. The US Department of Defense, presumably now more at ease with its relationship to S.H.I.E.L.D., was highly influential in the production of *Captain Marvel*. Not only did it provide military equipment but also utilised Carol Danvers role as an American fighter pilot for promotional purposes, again demonstrating the co-constitutive nature of the Marvel films of this period. The US Air Force launched an ad campaign to be played before *Captain Marvel* screenings as a recruitment ad. In the 30-second clip we see exclusively female Air Force personnel and spectacular images of fighter jets while a female voice is voiced over: "Every superhero has an origin story. We all got our start somewhere. For us, it was the US Air Force." At the end we see the question in big letters across the screen: "What will your origin story be?" (USAF, 2019).

The obvious and slickly showcased connection between the film and the military was made no secret. The newspaper Air Force Times proudly presented pictures of the visits of Captain Marvel and Nick Fury actors Brie Larson and Samuel L. Jackson at the Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada (Losey, 2019). The images were repeated across various social media platforms. In this way, the film portrays more than the technological, social, and political forms of superiority embedded in how Americans like to make sense of their armed forces and what solutions to political problems should look like – it also projected the idea that *you*, the viewer, could also be a (super)hero if you signed up for military service.

Some more conservative observers do take issue with the diversification of these texts as alleged expressions of how Disney and Warner Brothers had fallen victim to some liberal, political correctness conspiracy. Apart from the more visibly female cast, some also took issue with the fact that *Black Panther* was nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards, insisting this was due to political correctness (Quora.com, 2019). Even *Justice League* (a film that also incorporates superheroes of different genders and ethnicities) was read as anti-Trump from the start as it allegedly draws visual parallels between a rioting mob and Trump supporters (TheLastHistorian, 2019). Ultimately the films do not go beyond what audiences are already accustomed to, which makes the films understandable and readable by a large audience while still addressing issues that might make some parts of their audiences feel uncomfortable without completely challenging the status quo, a circumstance that might be necessary for the debate around the state of gender and racism in the age of Trump. Again, superhero texts can be read very differently from across the political spectrum, no matter the political position of the director or the ideological persuasion of the actors. Liberals and conservatives alike can

each take something they like and recognise from superhero films even while some aspects of their beliefs or values might be challenged.

Issues of gender and race are not the only ones that are easily detectable as essential to the way American identity is negotiated. Trump's election and presidency was very much built on an anti-immigrant agenda with his promise to build a wall along the US-Mexican border, consequently followed up by the so-called Muslim travel ban, and warnings of migrant caravans about to sweep into America during the time of the mid-term elections in 2018. This theme is furthermore connected to the MAGA rhetoric in the sense that migration and the underlying themes of threat and terrorism are then paralleled with the decline of empire. A vast bulk of superhero films engage with questions of migration/refugees and/or invasion of formerly safe empires, for example in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Wonder Woman* and continued in *Justice League*, *Aquaman*, *Captain Marvel*, *Black Panther* as well as the final two Avengers films in 2018 and 2019. The filmic texts open a variety of moral and political questions around what happens when the homeland is thought to be or literally under attack or facing destruction. *Captain Marvel* and *Thor: Ragnarok* are sustained through this question as peoples in both films – the Skrulls and the Asgardians – are existentially threatened by the destruction of their homeworlds and have become refugees. The films come to the conclusion that saving said peoples is the right thing to do, always subject to superheroic intervention of course. The reception goes so far as to liken *Ragnarok's* villain, Hela, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as both act against their own people (Marcotte, 2017) or likening the situation of the Asgardians or the Skrulls to questions of contemporary international law and asylum-seekers (Gilliland, 2017; Pulliam-Moore, 2019).

Again, it is possible to read these texts as liberal counter-narratives especially at a time that sees the cinematic texts juxtaposed with what many Americans would see as the extreme rhetoric and politics that Trump and his administration pursue. However, the themes that are transported here are rather playing on religious tropes ingrained in American mythology. This is to say that, to take *Thor: Ragnarok* as an example, the Asgardians (which were a not very subtle metaphor for Americans in the first two films) are depicted as a chosen people, Heimdal functions as Noah or Moses and the ship on which the Asgardians can escape can be interpreted as a reference to the Ark – or alternatively in the canon of the American civil religion as George Washington freeing his people from British rule and delivering them to the promised land. After the destruction of Asgard and the subsequent attack by Thanos, the surviving Asgardians are brought to Norway to symbolically and geopolitically root them back to their origin in Norse mythology. At the end of the film in the Ark/ship, Heimdal reiterates Odin's words spoken earlier in the film and already reiterated by Thor: "Asgard is not a place. It's a people." This echoes the theme transcending a lot of previous films, namely that America as a concept (coded here

through Asgard) is not up for negotiation. Rather, the concept is made eternal by insinuating that the nation was not bound to space or time. The heroes and the people will prevail unquestionably on their mission (think of Manifest Destiny) while the place can be left behind. Hela as the villain who overtakes Asgard as the corrupt, evil capital reflects the way Americans quite often conceive of Washington, DC even while the people remain pure, more willing to sacrifice themselves than to subjugate to authoritarianism.

In looking at three overarching themes – gender, race, and migration – we can see how the MCU and DC can be read as counter-narratives from a liberal and a conservative perspective. Interestingly, *Captain Marvel's* co-director Ryan Fleck commented on the refugee theme in his and Anna Boden's film:

It's not like we started with that agenda at all. In fact, we were just telling the straightforward story, and then once we got to a certain point, we realized that yeah, the Skrulls really are refugees. That's when that theme arose. For us as filmmakers, it always feels good for there to be a sort of real-world parallel to the themes we're working with so that when you leave the theaters, you don't just get the impression that you're watching escapist fantasy.

This underlines again that superhero films are grappling with highly contemporary issues whether they are intentionally placed or not. The team narratives of the Avengers or Justice League is expanded by an increasing diversification of the texts presented to us. Samira Nadkarni argues that Joss Whedon's productions "have always largely been coded by anti-establishment rhetoric, suggesting that any presentation of the way authority, terrorism, and resistance is presented is intended to both expose and undercut any precise reading of these terms" (2015, p. 2). The superhero films discussed so far may seem a weak remedy for what many inside and outside of the US experience as a period of existential crisis within American foreign policy and national identity, but they do play a significant role in forming cultural discourse that can have social and political ramifications. Not surprisingly, existential threats again form the central theme of the double-header finale to the Avengers series as well as DC's *Justice League*.

### The existential struggle embedded

The formulation of the 'War on Terror' established a conflict in which success or victory became vague and unattainable notions. Even George W. Bush would later come to regret his "Mission Accomplished" speech in 2003 which although designed to initiate some form of endpoint within the wider conflict became increasingly premature in its claims (Mooney, 2008). The impossibility of being victorious then becomes a key issue both for US foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for superheroes who are rushing from existential battle to existential battle. It seems that under Trump these notions become even more confused. It is rather the case that the global rise of populism and feeling of endemic crisis finds its

continuation in a very specific way in an American context. The high frequency of Trump's escapades and scandals, the escalation of rhetoric and arbitrary actions towards both allies and antagonists also have to be seen in the light of new and social media. The speed and the high-profile politics of Trump seem important to how we engage with political and cultural events alike. On the one hand, the way politics is negotiated, communicated, and circulated has changed drastically as work on digital diplomacy has pointed out, arguing that norms of political communication as well as the lines between politics, entertainment, culture and, ultimately, reality and fiction blur (Chadwick, 2013; Duncombe, 2017; Manor, 2018). The consequences of these forms of political communication drastically change: first, the speed at which information can be distributed via different digital channels; but also, second, who can become a political agent (Constantinou, 2018).

This surely is not an entirely new development that started with Trump, but it feeds into multiple parallel discourses on post-truth and populism. However, what we experience in this period is not so much a phase in which truth has lost its meaning. Talking about post-truth carries the dangerous assumption that there was an era of truth and its related concepts of purity, honesty, and authenticity that got lost because of Trump and the rise of right-wing populism. In this sense, his critics as well as his supporters indulge in a sense of nostalgia before everything went complicated and bad. In his analysis of the media system and simulation, Jean Baudrillard analysed almost 40 years ago:

There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence (1983, pp. 12-13)

Superheroes can fulfil the nostalgic function since they have always been around for everyone alive today. They also circulate easier, quicker and to wider audiences than they did through the traditional medium of the comic book since they not only dominate cinemas but are also very much present in digital spaces. The superheroic phenomenon then grows with its circulation which then means furthermore that in these fragmented mediascapes, audiences are "projecting their own political subjectivities onto the hero." (Dittmer, 2012, p. 154). More importantly, this "is the point where we enter the transhistorical or transpolitical – that is to say, the sphere where events do not really take place precisely because they are produced and broadcast 'in real time,' where they have no meaning because they can have all possible meanings" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 51). In regards to Captain America's films, Vernon argues that this "becomes an interpretive crux that restorative nostalgia – looking backwards to a golden age for answers to contemporary problems – cannot solve" (2016, p. 128).

Marvel developed their epic climax between 2017-2019 with the appearance of the cosmic villain and interplanetary threat from Thanos, while DC similarly offered the initial encounter with Darkseid. As so

often, while the DCEU develops a similar narrative to the MCU one, it lags a few years behind. DC's climax in the battle for the future of the universe will arrive at some point after 2021. However, on the side of the MCU, Phase Three's double-headed finale was presented in the epic and hugely successful *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. In short, Thanos believes he can bring harmony to the universe by killing half its population in an instant by using the power of the six Infinity Stones. He claims to want to do so not out of selfish reasons but out of necessity. As he explains to Dr Strange on his home planet Titan:

Strange: Let me guess. Your home?

Thanos: It was. And it was beautiful. Titan was like most planets. Too many mouths, and not enough to go around. And when we faced extinction, I offered a solution.

Strange: Genocide.

Thanos: But at random, dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman. And what I predicted came to pass.

Strange: Congratulations. You're a prophet.

Thanos: I'm a survivor.

Strange: Who wants to murder trillions.

Thanos: With all six Stones, I could simply snap my fingers, and they would all cease to exist. I call that... mercy.

Strange: And then what?

Thanos: I finally rest... and watch the sun rise on a grateful universe. The hardest choices require the strongest wills.

In this sense, Thanos addresses highly existential issues such as climate change and resource scarcity on the one hand and mass extinction or killing, especially fitting to a time of Extinction Rebellion, geopolitical and terroristic challenges, as well as a return of nuclear anxieties into global politics (exemplified by the American conflict with North Korea and Iran and the cancellation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty with Russia). Unlike some of the other villains we have seen over the years, Thanos incorporates a likeability similar to the Joker or Bane (because of their anti-system mentality), Two-Face (because of his self-perceived impartiality), and Ozymandias (as a utopian idealist). But as with Ozymandias and his plan to sacrifice millions of New Yorkers to foster world peace and disarmament, Thanos must fail.<sup>6</sup> The end of *Infinity War*, however, is designed to shock audiences as Thanos is successful in his plan to collect the six Infinity Stones, snap his fingers and extinguish half of life in the universe, including many of the Avengers and the Guardians of the Galaxy.

The beginning of *Avengers: Endgame* depicts the world five years after half the universe's population and thus half of Earth's population has been eradicated. The remaining Avengers are as traumatised as the rest of the survivors with Steve Rogers shown attending a support group. Reuniting with Black

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly nuclear disarmament happens in *X-Men: Apocalypse*, but after the main villain Apocalypse is destroyed the world returns to its logic of deterrence without any broader discussion.

Widow, they wonder what their job and purpose are now after such a massive disaster that they were powerless to stop. The parallel to a post-'9/11' world in which heroism becomes harder to grasp is obvious. We see a monument to 'the Vanished', a foggy Manhattan Island, the Statue of Liberty and a deserted baseball stadium, all of which evoke traumatic post-'9/11' memories. Most importantly, Captain America's appearance has changed drastically since *Captain America: Civil War*. Not did he lose his shield in that film but from then on only features in a black costume without the patriotic star-spangled stars and stripes. This transformation from Captain America to the 'Nomad' recalls the comic book story arc from the 1970s in which Cap, carefully trying to stay out of Vietnam, becomes disillusioned during the Watergate crisis and loses his uniform and identity before returning as a reinvigorated Captain America (Gillen, 2009).

The Nomad turn stands furthermore for the existential crisis that Cap is going through while his identity and persona are quite often as fragmented and crisis-prone as the American nation itself. Ultimately, the question posed by Cap and Black Widow – what to do after the trauma – remains widely unanswered as the Avengers use ingenuity, time travel, some further sacrifice, and a good deal of violence to thwart Thanos. The newly re-assembled Avengers, including Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Thor, Ant-Man and Captain Marvel manage to design a 'time heist' that reverses Thanos' lethal snap of his fingers and brings everybody back to life. With almost every character from the past 10 years of the MCU gathered, *Endgame* delivers what Marvel has been promising: the ultimate, apocalyptic battle of the superheroes against Thanos and his massed armies to save Earth, the galaxy, and the universe.

Interestingly, two films before *Endgame*, namely *Infinity War* and *Captain America: Civil War*, open up complex moral questions about superheroism in our contemporary world: think of Vision's contemplation that it may be the Avengers themselves who produce the violence they actually try to fight or the motivation of Thanos which is nurtured through his awareness of the problem of a lack of resources and over-population. But in the end, those questions remain unanswered as well; while the Avengers fight each other almost to death in *Civil War* because of the question of where superheroes (and as an extension American foreign policy) should go and what violence within world politics means, this question is completely ignored in *Endgame* because of the bigger fight against the ultimate villain. The battle of different values and moral questions is pushed aside for the greater good, mirroring the lack of any form of critical thought after '9/11' within American security discourses (on the lack of critique in the aftermath of '9/11' see Croft, 2006).



But it is not only the Avengers who find a new form of togetherness and purpose; Thanos suddenly changes his motivation halfway through *Endgame* as demonstrated by a pivotal dialogue between Tony Stark and Captain America (not uncoincidentally the two personifications of America) with Thanos just before the final battle.

Thanos: You could not live with your own failure. And where did that bring you? Back to me. I thought by eliminating half of life, the other half would thrive. But you've shown me that's impossible. And as long as there are those that remember what was, there will always be those that are unable to accept what can be. They will resist.

Iron Man: Yep. We're all kinds of stubborn.

Thanos: I'm thankful. Because now, I know what I must do. I will shred this universe down to its last atom. And then, with the stones you've collected for me, create a new one. Teeming with life, but knows not what it has lost but only what it has been given. A grateful universe.

Captain America: Born out of blood.

Thanos: They'll never know it. Because you won't be alive to tell them.

After a brief battle scene, Thanos adds: "In all my years of conquest, violence, slaughter...it was never personal. But I'll tell you now, what I'm about to do to your stubborn, annoying little planet, I'm gonna enjoy it. Very, very much."

Thanos' motivation has now really changed from an admittedly inhumane form of pragmatic morality to one of revenge, punishment and sadism. The revisionist message behind *Endgame* gets pushed through in the last epic battle, which is visually not too dissimilar from *The Lord of The Rings: The Two Towers* and the Battle of Helm's Deep in which faceless Orcs are slaughtered without end. Ultimately, Tony Stark sacrifices himself by using the Gauntlet holding the Infinity Stones to snap his fingers to destroy Thanos and his army. Once again and in logical tradition with *Iron Man* 11 years previously, the insinuation is that the Gauntlet and the Infinity Stones as a weapon of mass destruction can only be put to good use in the right hands. Thanos dissolves in the same way as the good guys such as Spider-Man, Doctor Strange and Black Panther had dissolved in *Infinity War*, but with completely the opposite effect for the audience, reiterating again the point that violence against an existential threat is not only the ultima ratio but is desirable and spectacular (and therefore entertaining). The violence is depoliticised and dehistoricised again, rendering the desired catharsis only momentary. Despite the finality of its title, the departures of Iron Man, Captain America and Black Widow, and its lack of a post-credits scene (for the first time in the MCU), *Avengers: Endgame* is only the penultimate chapter in the Infinity Saga as it is followed almost immediately by *Spider-Man: Far From Home* and the next gigantic battle is already anticipated by the announcement of MCU's Phase 4. Dan Hassler-Forest's analysis of the superhero genre as a historical short circuit works well for *Avengers: Endgame* specifically: "The endlessly repeated superhero cycles fulfil this antinomy: the world is both saved and destroyed, the

hero both sacrifices himself and survives, the events in the films both did and did not happen” (2012, p. 212). The rescue of the world remains futile because we know it will face mortal peril again and again.

### The end of MCU’s Phase Three and the end of American leadership?

After having its cataclysmic finale in *Endgame*, the MCU had one more film to contribute in its Phase Three, namely *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. Compared to the Avengers films the co-production between Sony and Disney seems like Phase Three ending on a lighter note. However, the Trump presidency clearly leaves its dents in the way that Marvel decided to depict its most commercially successful superhero while it continues what has already started in the Avengers films, most remarkably the end of the old superheroes and the transition of power to a new, younger, more diverse generation. This is also why the film fits well into an anti-Trump narrative. In this sense, it continues what I have described as the diversification of the superhero genre generally, and specifically what has already started in the prequel *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (J. Johnson, 2017). Another important point is that the film also continues the globalisation of the MCU, making various places outside of the US the location for the plot.

One point about the diversification of the superhero genre is made in *Endgame* and underlined in *Far From Home*: The old American superheroes (and as an extension American leadership) are displayed as increasingly outdated and running out of time. Iron Man and Captain America as the most obvious personifications of American national identity but they are both withdrawn from the arena of heroism by the film’s end, albeit for different reasons. Both exit through classical tropes in US culture and society. Iron Man sacrifices himself to destroy Thanos and to save the world, while Captain America goes back in time but decides to stay there and grow old with his true love, Peggy Carter, rather than to return to the contemporary time. In doing so, he serves multiple functions, as his journey symbolises a return to old-fashioned, American family values (nostalgically underlined by him dancing with Peggy to some 1940s music as the last scene in *Endgame*), while he does not return to being Cap again after his turn into Nomad. At the end of *Endgame*, however, he gives his iconic shield to Sam Wilson, a black superhero known as Falcon until then, presumably for him to take up the role of Captain America, while War Machine looks ready to take up the role left by the death of Iron Man. In the Spider-Man films, Tony Stark took Peter Parker under his wing as a protege, a move that becomes even more meaningful through Stark’s death after he has helped restore Parker to life. Adding to this passing of the mantle to a new generation, Thor chooses to cede his power as King of Asgard to Valkyrie, a black female Asgardian he has fought alongside, at the end of *Endgame*.

Because a younger, more diverse generation of superheroes takes over, the films can easily be read as anti-Trump films (M. Goldberg, 2019; Wilkinson, Abad-Santos, VanDerWerff, & Frank, 2019). At the end

of *Far from Home*, in the mid-credit scene, we can see the infamous tabloid journalist Jonah Jameson who, in an Alex Jones of InfoWars kind of way, announces the identity of Spider-Man and attacks him for allegedly killing the villain of the film, Mysterio (which the audience knows did not happen): “There you have it, folks. Conclusive proof that Spider-Man was responsible for the brutal murder of Mysterio! An inter-dimensional warrior who gave his life to protect our planet, and who will no doubt go down in history as the greatest superhero of all time.” The exaggeration of not only legitimising Mysterio but actually making him out to be the *greatest* superhero of all times echoes the rhetoric that we have heard many times since the election of Trump. The propagandistic, sensationalist style of Jameson and the falsehood of his (fake) news intensifies that impression. Mysterio himself manages to fool Spider-Man and S.H.I.E.L.D. for half the film, outing himself to Spider-Man later by saying that “I control the truth. Mysterio is the truth” and “People tend to believe...and nowadays...they'll believe anything.” Everything is illusion and the truth is under attack is what comes across in the film. Mysterio even mocks ‘the masses’ by pointing out that his background story (that he is from a parallel dimension of the multiverse) sounds ludicrous.

But the film eventually gives a clear message of whom to believe and whom audiences can trust unambiguously, namely Peter Parker and his young friends. The use of force that Spider-Man applies is sanitised and necessary, ready to fill the vacuum left by the death of Iron Man. Unlike Tony Stark, Peter Parker is willing and eager to prove himself but reluctant in the use of violence, only striking when the situation absolutely demands it. At the same time, the film reiterates that a weapon is only bad if it remains in the hands of the bad guys. The device functioning as basically omnipotent WMD is the computer system EDITH that Stark left Peter with which he can assassinate basically anyone within seconds (though this is only one of its many functions). In what film writer Richard Brody calls the only “sharp moment of comedic flair” (Brody, 2019b) Peter almost kills a classmate out of jealousy. Resonating with previous displays of Tony Stark’s technology, any potential harm of said technology is not displayed, on the contrary, it is comedically featured without building on the chance for reflection. In a development quite typical for superheroic narratives, Peter rejects EDITH at first, handing it to Mysterio which demonstrates his reluctance and benevolence as a hero, only to then go through a phase of growing (up) to finally accept the responsibility thrust upon him. This is eerily similar to the origin story reboots of Thor and Captain America in 2011, the heroic masculinity framed by benevolence and benign reluctance, potentially reminiscent of the Obama years.

Furthermore, the film functions as an intensification of the orientation towards global audiences by making the locations of the plot based in Europe. The film uses European geography as a structuring tool, featuring Venice, Prague, Berlin, a town in Holland, and ultimately London as the place for the last battle against Mysterio. This international flair connects well with the already discussed diversification,

however, it only works in part; for example, the depicted bus journey from Venice to Prague leads them through the Austrian Alps which would be an unnecessary detour in real-life. Criticising the shallow display of diversity and the depiction of the rest of the world, Brody argues that “the movie’s depth of characterization and imaginative amplitude of social relations (as well as its placing of American characters in European settings) could have been borrowed straight from the Disney playbook of decades past” (Brody, 2019b). And while Brody’s critique might be considered accurate, the formulaic text finishes Phase Three of the MCU off with a light, globalised text that leaves audiences with a liberal, comedic sentiment and the feeling that young Peter Parker is the right person to be trusted to control an omnipotent assassination tool. The older generation is gone, and a new, younger, perhaps more innocent generation will now take over – something that is clearly yet to happen in the US itself with its septuagenarian presidential candidates in 2020, but with the promise of what is to come already present with the rise of politicians such as the 30 year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, aka AOC.

### Superheroes and the Trumpian culture war

The Trump presidency expresses not only a constant crisis in the fabric of American national identity but also embeds the sense of constant threats, mostly encapsulated by relatively vague notions of terrorism, rogue states, and migration. At the same time, Trumpian foreign policy is heavily expressed and negotiated through social media, especially Twitter. Baudrillard’s conceptualisation of the age of mass media as one of second-hand truth (rather than post-truth) finds its fulfilment even more in times of social media. Consequently, we do not only see a President who is active on Twitter multiple if not dozens of times a day, superheroic texts (together with a wide array of other cultural products) have now left the location of cinema and TV screens to enter the virtual world in which their images and narratives can circulate in real time in the form of pictures, memes, and videos. This is important because when superheroes function as a stand-in for American national identity then their meaning and development become existential for the US itself. As Jason Dittmer argues: “If Captain America is increasingly unable to circulate in the news media as an unproblematic icon of the United States [...], then the ontological status of a singular nation-state is implicitly called into question” (Dittmer, 2012, p. 154). As I have argued elsewhere, the one revealing aspect is that while Captain America (via actor Chris Evans) is negotiated in the digital realm as either conservative if one is conservative or liberal if one is liberal, the cultural character of Captain America is never in question. That is to say that in the fragmented discourses that are constantly happening online and through which American identity is constantly negotiated, Captain America (emblematic for superheroes as a whole) is never questioned; on the contrary, thanks to his long history and his versatility as a character he can function at any given time as the embodiment of *true American heroism* (Schmid, 2020).

Social media then makes political engagement in this sense easier as everyone becomes consumer and producer of political discourses, changing the way foreign policy is made as well. This means that discursive elements become increasingly complex and fragmented while popular culture feeds crucially into these discourses. Trump is no exception; he has no issue using cultural references seemingly without any context. During Thanksgiving in 2019, for example, he tweeted a photo in which his face was photoshopped over the body of Sylvester Stallone playing the fictional boxer Rocky Balboa from the *Rocky* film series, not giving any caption or having any text, this causing mostly confusion and bemusement (Noor, 2019). The references to Trump as either hero or villain, comparing him, his advisors, or members of his cabinet with cultural characters happens frequently. However, an even more telling reference was a retweet by Trump featuring himself as Thanos from *Endgame*. In December 2019, @TrumpWarRoom tweeted a video in the middle of the Impeachment procedures against the president, featuring Trump as the MCU's villain and calling the impeachment a 'sham'. What happens in the video is that Thanos with Trump's head is snapping his fingers while uttering his infamous phrase from *Endgame*, "I am inevitable". The next shot we see are six Democratic politicians, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, at a press briefing who dissolve just as half the universe's population did in *Avengers: Infinity War* (TrumpWarRoom, 2019). While there are various inconsistencies in the 21-second clip that seem obvious – like portraying your preferred candidate, Trump, as a genocidal, mad Titan – the message is clear, which might be the reason why Trump gladly retweeted the clip.

These examples demonstrate two points. First, that superheroic texts are circulating through social media and in a still highly successful manner across cinema and TV screens and are very much at the centre of political debates, both on the right and the left. They are even circulated not only by everyday consumers but also by policymakers themselves. This also underlines how recognisable and global a phenomenon they have become. Second, it also shows how superheroic texts can be appropriated by different actors and used in different interpretations and ways. Most importantly, they still very much demonstrate a massive presence as carriers for contemporary and post-'9/11' discourses in the way they negotiate current security and foreign policy issues. As Jeffrey Brown argues:

Superhero films are a means to collectively deal with the trauma of 9/11 and symbolically help make sense of the world again. Superheroes represent an effort to rewrite and reconfirm the belief in American exceptionalism. Specifically, the superhero genre counters fears of a nation that has grown soft, weak, and vulnerable, instead offering a narrative of toughening up, of remasculinizing America. As men who have been defined by trauma, just as America has, the superhero is able to rise up and prove himself stronger than any threats. (2017, p. 64)

The traumatic dimension of the *Avengers* films fits perfectly into this analogy. After all, while the ultimate existential threat leads to half of the universe being killed, the superheroes literally go back in

time to prevent the incident from happening. While Bush tried to sell the 'War on Terror' as eschatological confrontation between good and evil and Obama tried to reframe counter-terrorism through liberal, rational re-conceptualisations, Trump, however, aims to go back in time to make America as great as any imagination would let it be. As I have argued previously:

The location for retrieving a sense of self seems to be positioned in the past. Voices arguing that America is not the greatest country in the world anymore (because of Trump) as well as make America great again both resort to the same discursive realm that lies in a fantastical and purely positive, unblemished past (Schmid, 2020).

The superheroes going back in time to prevent Thanos' deadly attack is a move that Trump has already done, namely immersing in a nostalgic past before '9/11' and before the complications that came through the 'War on Terror'. Preventing Thanos' finger snap is akin to being able to go back in time and prevent the terrorist attacks of '9/11' from taking place. In this sense, any systemic, historical or political reflection about foreign policy or international relations remains silent. Consequently, any problems that America or the world are facing remain unresolved. In this sense, Trump resembles more what Reagan started in the 1980s with what Wolin describes as counter-revolution: "The result was a unique dynamic: change that professed to look backward to some distant 'city on a hill.' It was not regressive in the sense of actually restoring the past. Rather the 'new conservatism' appealed to an idealized, mythical past as a strategy in its 'culture war' against 'liberalism'" (Wolin, 2008 x-xi).

Despite their relatively long run of almost 20 years as one of *the* most successful and prolific genres in Hollywood's film production, superhero films were not going to go away during the Trump era and whatever comes next. Rather they had established themselves as texts that could narrate crisis and concepts of threat like hardly any other cultural product, fitting almost perfectly into the vacuums left by the neo-liberal, post-modern age.

## Conclusion

What I have shown in this chapter is that the Trump presidency does not herald the beginning of a new crisis but is rather the continuation of what has been foreshadowed by the way Bush and Obama have fought the 'War on Terror'. At the same time Trump's presidency is built on vague notions of a glorious past and American core mythologies, that are being heightened and exaggerated through his populist demeanour and the way the political system in the US has been developing in a post-Cold War era (if not to say since Reagan). Furthermore, foreign policy is increasingly negotiated through new forms on social media, producing a multiplicity of political agents. All these points, however, lead into what I would diagnose as a cataclysmic explosion of threat, black-white situations, challenging the foundations that the American nation is built on, namely violence. If one sees the producers of violence on the left or the right, the political debate does not take place anymore but is rather shifted into the digital, the

virtual, and the imaginary. Even after Thanos is beaten, there is no lasting catharsis. To say it with Baudrillard,

Events that are more or less ephemeral because they no longer have any resolution except in the media (where they have the 'resolution' images do, where they are 'resolved' in high definition) – they have no political resolution. We have a history that no longer consists of action, of acts, but instead culminates in a virtual acting-out; it retains a spectral air of déjà-vu (2000, p. 50).

This is to say that the polysemy that texts such as superhero films or Trump's rhetoric display is not something made by Trump but rather a function of the way politics operates in neo-liberal post-modernity: "This is the point where we enter the transhistorical or transpolitical—that is to say, the sphere where events do not really take place precisely because they are produced and broadcast "in real time," where they have no meaning because they can have all possible meanings" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 51).

Superheroes are very much at the centre of the way that American identity is negotiated, might this be directly on the cinema screens, in the everyday, through different consumer goods, or in digital spaces. The polarised political landscape – domestically as well as globally – lends itself to evoke images of heroism and villainy, even more so when the president employs boastful rhetoric at any given moment. In this sense, superheroes negotiate American identity and notions of security, safety and threat. As Kyle Grayson writes, "Threats provide citizens with the ontological security, that is, security about their own identity, their rightful position in the world and who (or what) poses a danger to them" (2013, p. 390). It seems, however, that in the America of Trump the ontology of security and the idea of the American nation as a whole is fragmented and broken. One of the consequences of this condition, however, is that if we take superheroes to be integral authors of national and crisis narratives, the intensification of crisis, polarisation of politics, and the collapse of politics into violence, then surely superheroes are here to stay.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusion

“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.” – Antonio Gramsci

### Contribution and originality

This thesis has made several original contributions to the field of International Relations and Critical Security Studies. First, I have critically engaged with different concepts of security and foreign policy in an American context. Rather than developing a normative approach towards how security should be redefined, I have critically analysed important features of post-‘9/11’ security discourses and the ‘War on Terror’. In doing so I have shown how popular cultural artefacts, specifically American superheroes, are circulating through the domestic but also the global arena as important carriers of political discourses. The focus on the presidential terms of Bush, Obama and Trump illustrated how the superhero genre has co-produced specific security and foreign policy discourses and how the genre itself has evolved over time. Analysing the way superhero films helped to normalise the ‘War on Terror’ over the past 20 years can help to identify important discursive elements in the post-‘9/11’ world. Second, methodologically, I have established how an interdisciplinary and intertextual film analysis can be a fruitful way of analysing politics. This is to say that while a lot of analyses focus on representation as a source for research, they miss out on the active role that popular culture can play. By showing how film and politics are intertwined, this can strengthen the research agenda of those examining popular culture and world politics. The intertextual approach makes the analysis epistemologically more flexible, taking into account not only the text but also understanding the artefact itself as standing in connection with a variety of other subjects, contexts, actors, and institutions. Intertextual analysis then expands traditional discourse analysis beyond a purely representational reading. Third, the way I have engaged with superheroes, their long history as well as their cinematic boom after ‘9/11’, contributes to the analysis of crisis and crisis narratives. In an American context, superheroes are always connected to crisis and emerge, develop, and react strongly to shifts and ruptures within American politics. To understand crisis, therefore, it is crucial to look at popular culture and its artefacts as these are the sites where narratives of, and potential solutions to, crisis are negotiated. Furthermore, crisis and political or historical memory are categories that are subject to constant change rather than being fixed and stable. In the same way that the long-standing comic book and film heroes are being retrospectively altered, so is US foreign policy ‘retconned’ to fit overarching tropes embedded in American mythology.

The thesis delivers important insights into the way people make sense of security, foreign policy, and terrorism. By now the ‘War on Terror’ has been ostracised by various policymakers, media outlets, and academics inside and outside of the US, even those who might have initially been staunch supporters



of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Be that as it may, the specific logics of the period since the '9/11' attacks have not completely vanished. That is to say: despite all the critique, a certain common sense was established about how society needs a more robust form of security and surveillance (in a panoptic sense) and that citizens themselves were called to become more alert and suspicious (in a synoptic sense). Most importantly, terrorists are marked as villainous and beyond any reasoning, which also implies violence not only as necessary but inevitable and to some extent desired form of political action. As Zulaika points out, "counterterrorism has established a political and moral cordon sanitaire regarding terrorism, a strict taboo backed with the most stringent laws that de facto prohibits conducting an ethnography of terrorism" (2012, p. 58). The status as *terrorist* stands in direct line with a political response (namely annihilation), the question of who is and who is not a terrorist becomes existential while the deeper systemic reasons for so-called terroristic violence remain erased. This thesis' importance comes from the way it sheds light on the ways that this specific discourse on threat and violence is produced. As I have argued, audiences might be aware of the political implications of films that directly show terrorism as an issue, but the use of deadly force to combat evil is something seen as legitimate over and over again in superhero films even if they might seem more detached from reality. The way superheroes engage with their worlds, and our world, thus tells us something about the way counter-terrorism and violence against threats are being conducted and justified.

The thesis contributes in original and important ways to a vibrant and intellectually stimulating debate happening at the crossroads of International Relations, Critical Security Studies, Critical Terrorism, and Critical Geopolitics. In the past few decades there has been foundational, creative, and sophisticated work on the connections between popular culture and world politics, crucially framed as the *popular culture and world politics continuum* (Grayson et al., 2009). Contemporary works have highlighted how this research agenda can be developed further, being appreciative of the interdisciplinary and evolving nature of (geo-)political and aesthetic or visual research (Bleiker, 2018c; Robert A. Saunders & Vlad Strukov, 2018). At the same time, there have been critical interrogations of superheroes and superhero films as political artefacts in the post-'9/11' world (Dittmer, 2013; Hassler-Forest, 2012; McSweeney, 2018). While all these literatures are contributing methodologically, theoretically, or empirically to the debate, I contribute to it in a few novel ways. First, I am treating superheroes and superhero films as serious political artefacts and not merely a navigation tool for cultural analysis. In doing so I treat the seemingly detached worlds of politics and culture as highly interwoven. This, then, gives superhero films a crucial role as artefacts that do not only mirror or represent American national identity but also (co-)produce it, functioning as a reoccurring crisis narrative, and ultimately helping to shape a lot of the values, themes, and ideas of which US foreign policy is made. Second, I am giving a fuller account of American superheroes and their stories to demonstrate how the surge of superhero films after '9/11'

should be seen as strongly connected to foundational myths of the American nation and the way they reappear today. This means that my analysis reaches from the founding of America all the way to the different developments of superheroes in film right up to the end of Phase 3 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This helps to better contextualise and understand the rise and rise of superheroes. Third, the intertextual nature of my analysis gives my account a specific coherence as it acknowledges that superheroes are increasingly circulating in different media and becoming an even bigger phenomenon than being simply restricted to comic books or film. At the same time, the strength of the superhero genre within the comic books and films really only enables the increased presence of superheroes in social media, and also video games.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, superhero films play a crucial role in setting up the texts for becoming a transmedia phenomenon.

### Analytical synthesis

Over the course of the different chapters, I have answered the following research question: How does Hollywood superhero cinema, specifically the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, co-constitute post-‘9/11’ US security discourses?

In Chapter 1, I establish the framework of my thesis. First, I positioned my research design and the research question within important debates going on within International Relations and Critical Security Studies, but also touching on Foreign Policy Analysis, Critical Terrorism Studies, and Critical Geopolitics. Methodologically, I developed a post-structuralist lens mostly drawing on Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard as well as well modernised versions of post-structural thinking within International Relations. This helped me to further develop an inter-textual approach to film analysis.

Theoretically, I argued that an artefact such as superheroes and superhero films in their reincarnation after ‘9/11’ has to be analysed against the backdrop of a post-modern and neo-liberal world. I elaborated how popular culture gains a specific role during a post-modernity that is characterised by the collapse of modern narratives and stories. Popular culture then fulfils a function that is not only reducible to the production of some fictional text: on the contrary, popular culture becomes a crucial means to make political issues part of the mundane and the everyday, blurring the line between *reality* and fiction. It is also important to understand neo-liberalism as a form of self-governance and *zeitgeist* that is overarching the way subjectivities are being negotiated along the notions of resilience, self-reliance, and responsibility. On a societal level, neo-liberalism creates a sense of perpetual and imminent collapse of society and politics which bears important consequences for discourses on

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<sup>7</sup> Sony released the video games *Spider-Man* (2018) for the PlayStation 4 and *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* for the PlayStation 5 in 2020. Crystal Dynamics released *Marvel’s Avengers* (2020) for Playstation and Xbox consoles. The plot starts with a terror attack on San Francisco.

security, surveillance, and survival itself. The products of popular culture, in this case superheroes, become crucial interlocutors, navigating between politics, culture, and the everyday.

The last part of the opening chapter engaged with the way that America as a nation and crisis are intrinsically intertwined. From the founding of the nation, crisis and violent conflict were already part of the fabric of America. In this sense, the 'War on Terror' displays a new crisis in a specific way but also draws on previous crises regarding violence and existential struggle. In its hyperreality, America is inherently tied to these questions of apocalyptic crises, Manichean battles, and desire for redemption (Baudrillard, 2010). This prepares an excellent ground for '9/11' to become a renewed existential crisis to the nation.

Chapter 2 engaged with the origin story of American superheroes and how they are tied to the mythical origin story of the American nation itself. The plethora of individuals, starting with the Founding Fathers, heightened values such as freedom and democracy, as well as constructions such as Manifest Destiny or the Frontier experience. In turn, these feed into a national mythology that we can still see today, also called the American Monomyth (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977). Buttressed by a violent revolution and hundreds of years of war, "the idea of struggle was inbred into the American monomyth" (Lang & Trimble, 1988, p. 159). The cultural reproduction of the Frontier brought the role of individuals to the fore, producing a mythology around Western and cowboy heroes. Despite the aggressive nature of westward expansion and the aggression against natives and other nations, the American project was always seen as defensive and protectionist in its essence.

World War II then connected images and notions of American heroism to an identity struggle in the 1930s. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression and war, America was faced with the question of which direction the nation should go: to turn its back on the world and persist with isolationism or embrace the role of global leadership. Ultimately, the involvement in the war was preceded by the creation of the first modern superheroes in the form of comic book characters, such as Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. From the beginning, they took a stance of fighting evil wherever it appeared. However, they never operated as aggressors but rather as defenders of the nation and occasionally the world. The fact that Captain America gets frozen in time in the comic books and later in the films underlines the timeless nature of the character and serves as a constant reminder of American victory in the 'good war'.

After the World War superheroes needed time to adapt to the new realities of the Cold War. In the 1960s a lot of the superhero characters we know today were being created, echoing nuclear anxiety around the Cuban Missile Crisis on the one hand, while they become more international on the other.

The 1970s and 1980s featured more contemplative, inward-looking superheroes, marked by the crises of Vietnam and Watergate. The *victory* at the end of the Cold War, however, did not bring back the sense of victory culture (Engelhardt, 1995) experienced after World War II, revealing the lack of an obvious endpoint to the Cold War conflict and the absence of a serious antagonist in its aftermath. Similarly, superheroes lacked a truly threatening villainous Other as they had done before. The beginning of the *X-Men* film franchise then functions as a segue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a new looming threat.

In Chapter 3, I have shown how during the Bush presidency (2001-2009), the superhero genre started to take form and narrate the 'War on Terror' from its own perspective, based on the spectacular, almost cinematic event of '9/11'. While '9/11' had to be interpreted and constructed, the specific meaning given to the event by Bush and others meant that the 'War on Terror' became what seems almost inevitable from today's perspective. *Spider-Man* was the first film that could be read as a post-'9/11' film even though it was mostly produced before the event. However, the theme of a hero who overcomes trauma in order to rise again and defeat evil resonated strongly with broader issues of the early 'War on Terror'. The first wave of superhero film reboots that followed after 2001 paralleled the search of the American nation for their own origin story that had been fragmented through the terror attacks. The *Spider-Man* trilogy, *Superman Returns*, and *Batman Begins* display symbolically charged worlds that play aesthetically with '9/11' and saviour themes. At the same time, they show a defenceless society that can only be saved by reinstating superheroic protection. While some of those productions had only modest success at the box office, they were crucial textual beginnings in the reinvigorated genre.

The films *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*, released in the summer before the presidential elections in 2008, performed exceptionally well at the box office, ranking on top that year. They reflect in various ways the disillusionment of the 'War on Terror' and the Bush presidency in the way they question the use of military power, foreign engagement, and the legitimate use of force in the case of *Iron Man*, and surveillance, torture, and moral complexities of the fight against evil in *The Dark Knight*. Both films, however, can easily be read both from a liberal perspective as open critiques of the Bush administration and also from a conservative view as affirmation of Bush's willingness and determinacy to defeat evil. However, the films also anticipate the Obama presidency in showing how Iron Man and Batman eventually realise that they have to change their ways and that another form of heroism is required in order to tackle future threats. The issues of targeted killing and mass surveillance usher in a discourse that would become a crucial part of Obama's 'War on Terror'. The superhero genre developed in a direction away from stand-alone productions to produce sequel after sequel within a growing story arc; *Iron Man* became the first instalment of Phase One of the MCU that told the Infinity Saga over the

course of 23 films; *The Dark Knight* was the middle film in the Dark Knight trilogy; with both series building on the success of the first Spider-Man trilogy from 2002-2007. This underpins the way the Bush administration had constructed the 'War on Terror' as an infinite war with an endless series of conflicts, each in anticipation of the next one.

In Chapter 4, I engaged with the first term of the Obama presidency and how both the newly elected president and the superhero genre attempted their respective reboots. While Obama's presidency was supposed to be a new start for US foreign policy and specifically the 'War on Terror', superhero films went through a second wave of reboots. Marvel introduced Captain America and Thor into its main cinematic universe while the X-Men franchise got two prequels with *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and *X-Men: First Class*. Spider-Man got his second reboot with *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Especially Thor and Captain America displayed what the new approach to the 'War on Terror' should look like, namely driven more through cooperation, rationality, and sensitivity. The aggressive, hyper-militarised and hyper-masculinised foreign policy of the Bush years should be replaced by a benign, benevolent form of masculine leadership and protection. This seemingly pushes the superhero genre in a more liberal direction, furthermore supported by a reinvented Iron Man in *Iron Man 2* whose development from a greedy, egoistic arms dealer to a more responsible and conscientious superhero is displayed as a positive one. Captain America, on the other hand, serves as a nostalgic reference to victories of the past, being a World War II veteran, while at the same time embodying a highly moral and virtuous version of American identity. His introduction to the MCU in 2011 fits the Obama era more than it would have done to Bush's as he presents liberal and conservative audiences with an overarching narrative that is old-fashioned yet also modern, reluctant and yet active.

The reboots within the MCU lead to the spectacular ending of MCU's Phase One in *The Avengers* in the year of Obama's re-election. The fight against an existential threat in New York (the main site of the '9/11' attacks) becomes a fight for the future of the world, making the fate of America a question for the whole world. For the first time the superheroes are coming together to fight evil as a team at a time of more international cooperation in Obama's own reboot of US foreign policy. The threat does not only come from the alien army that is attacking New York but also from the World Security Council (as a stand-in for political leaders) which resorts to firing a nuclear missile on the city out of desperation. It is the Avengers, however, who are successful in averting danger with united force against both the alien invaders and the overzealous politicians.

The victory the Avengers celebrate, however, is only short-term and not really celebrated, the post-credits scene already giving away that victory will only be temporary. Similarly, Obama's successful tracing and assassination of Osama bin Laden was celebrated by many Americans on the streets of

American cities but eventually the sense of victory was fleeting, leading into more and more sequels within the war against terrorism. Whether it was his own fault or not, at the end of Obama's first term there was little left of the reboot of US foreign policy let alone the hope of American resurrection.

In Chapter 5, I engaged with the second term of the Obama presidency and the slow descent into a new crisis within US foreign policy. The cathartic and swift victory that many Americans might have expected or hoped for from an Obama presidency was not to come. On the contrary, his own foreign policy, the way he conceptualised counter-terrorism, and his surveillance and drone programmes, actually deepened the infinite and inescapable logics of the 'War on Terror'. Meanwhile, films such as *Captain America: Winter Soldier* or *Iron Man 3* could be interpreted as counter-narratives that are criticising specific elements of Obama's war. Ultimately the critique remains shallow as what is criticised is more the state and its institutions or some elitist groups in the background. Superheroes and America itself are not subject of the critical contemplations the films display. The two films mentioned, as well as *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Man of Steel*, rather display a deep suspicion of the state (especially Washington, DC) and emphasise the nostalgic return to *true* American values accompanied by rural tranquillity as the space to regain a sense of Americanness.

The way the superheroes are defying the state is coupled with a return to a radical form of individualism. In form or another, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, and *Doctor Strange* all feature villains whose goal is not so much to kill but to assimilate, meaning to rob humanity (and Americans) of their individuality. The superheroes face these challenges with force, insinuating that an end to individualism as an American way of life would be worse than death itself. American myths such as the Frontier are then re-invoked as an inverted one where the Homeland and New York must be protected against threats from the outside. Ultimately, the continuation of the 'War on Terror' by Obama and his orientation towards international allies establish this inverted Frontier as a global one, expanding rather than limiting the war.

At the end of Obama's presidency terrorism remained an unresolved issue, with the villainous al Qaida now supplanted by the Islamic State. The unchanged crisis that the 'War on Terror' meant for America was at the same time intensified through an increasing internal fragmentation and polarisation. The irreconcilable camps of Democrats and Republicans had already widely stopped cooperating during the Obama presidency, resulting in policy gridlock, but were now confronted with a fierce battle between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump for the presidential election in 2016. *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* underline this existential battle for American values, not only threatened anymore by the villains but by the other side of the domestic political spectrum. This conflict specifically addresses the question of legality and legitimacy of violence and lethal force, a topic that

the superheroes, like Americans, do not agree on. At the end of *Captain America: Civil War*, Cap leaves his damaged shield behind, symbolically addressing the lack of self-protection and loss of self and disappears. The disillusioned end of Phase Two of the MCU and the Obama presidency left a lot of questions about American security and foreign policy unanswered, leading into the presidency of Donald Trump.

In Chapter 6, I have shown how the presidency of Donald Trump has moved the US into a state of total crisis and the political climate has shifted into one of permanent alarmism. The presidency has to be seen against the backdrop of a global rise in populism and the increasing polarisation of political debate in which compromise becomes almost impossible. The superhero genre also embeds this sense of infinite and existential crisis: the DCEU and the MCU present villains in the shape of Darkseid and Thanos who become a threat not only to America or the world but to the whole universe. At the same time the genre becomes more diverse, positioning itself as a liberal counter-narrative to the Trump presidency. Films such as *Wonder Woman* by DC as well as *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* by Marvel focus on black and female protagonists rather than them being secondary players in the stories of the main superhero (such as Black Widow to Iron Man, or Falcon to Captain America). *Spider-Man: Far From Home* equally features a diverse, younger cast. While the films even address issues such as slavery or migration, they refrain from risking any deeper, systemic discussion of issues such as race and gender. Rather, the films aim to profit from the debates without alienating broader parts of their audience, especially what might be termed, however imprecisely, “middle America”. The superheroes merely stand in contrast to Trump’s often aggressive or extreme rhetoric while they still force the bad guys into submission through the kind of force typical of white male heroes.

The villains in these later films offer yet again the possibility to reflect on the nature of superheroes, America, and American myths. Thanos questions and provokes the superheroes and their logic repeatedly by asking questions about climate change, resource scarcity, and war that could challenge the world views of his superheroic counterparts. *Avengers: Infinity War* gives the chance to challenge the logic of the endemic fight between good and evil. But *Avengers: Endgame* in its revisionism perpetuates the notion that such struggles must go on forever and that the bad guys deserve to die no matter in which reality or timeline they exist. All that is left to do is violence spectacularly enacted in an apocalyptic battle in *Avengers: Endgame*. The end of the MCU’s Phase Three also feeds into the bigger theme of the end of American leadership. Iron Man dies, Captain America grows old and retires, and Thor abdicates his throne. Equally, however, Captain America’s shield is passed on to the black superhero Falcon and the black female heroine Valkyrie becomes the new ruler of Asgard, indicating a preliminary end to traditional American leadership and transition to a more diverse future. *Spider-Man: Far From Home* comes across as a comparably light end to MCU’s Phase Three, full of comedic verve

and designed to appeal to international as well as domestic audiences as a liberal, diverse text. But the film offers another story in which the hero, in this case Spider-Man, must go through a phase of self-development and is ultimately rewarded with the ability to identify and assassinate threats through superior technology, an omnipotent computer system he inherits from Iron Man. Again, the next generation is picking up the mantle in ways that are necessary as new existential threats continue to arise even after the defeat of Thanos. The continued success of the genre has been brought to a (temporary) halt by the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020, the year also indicating the first time in 10 years without a Marvel Cinematic Universe film released at the cinema, although the delayed final instalment of the X-Men franchise, *New Mutants*, was released as cinemas began to reopen in late August and September 2020.

The aim of this project was to hint at the epistemic problems behind our assumptions regarding threat, violence, and security. It was not to suggest any solution or an alternative to the way world politics and US foreign policy function, as there might not be one, but to pin-point the shortcomings, contradictions, and failures of the status quo. Nonetheless it will be crucial to pursue the kind of political research that appreciates the importance of the mundane, the entertaining, and the banal, maybe not because it can change the world alone but in order to get a better and more sustainable understanding of the sources of violence and conflict.

### Future research

What I have done in this thesis is to tease out important and dominant themes of the superhero genre that co-constitute American security discourses after '9/11'. As with all research, and especially one that engages with sheer infinite aspects of popular cultural artefacts, there are some areas where future research could reveal further insights. First, future projects should be aware of the technological and textual developments of superheroes (as much as of other cultural artefacts). That is to say that they have come a long way from being comic book texts to feed into TV and film productions. Currently, their images and narratives are displayed, shared, and negotiated on social media platforms and become an important part of digital discourses. Seeing how superhero video games are becoming more refined and successful it will only be a matter of time until they extend their reach digitally and into newer, expansive technologies such as Virtual Reality. These developments change the way superhero texts are being consumed and how audiences can immerse themselves in those texts. The digital circulation does not require audiences to be familiar with the comic books or films themselves which means that the reach that they have and the way they are being distributed and perceived changes. Researchers have to acknowledge these technological and textual developments in order to engage with popular culture.



Second, my project has illustrated one way of how the 'War on Terror' has been and is being co-constituted through superhero films. In this way, I have engaged with how a national mythology can inform highly contemporary discourses. Future operationalisations of this kind of research could go in a variety of directions. For example, it would open the path to develop a comparative way of looking at national mythologies and their constructions of heroism. This could then lead to a better understanding of how specific national narratives, for example on the use of force or defining self and Other, become common sense and as an extension how this common sense can be deconstructed.

Third, methodologically my project can be extended to become more ethnographic. While comic book clubs, film clubs, or the Comic-Cons taking place from San Diego to London are usually not in the purview of political researchers, engaging with these 'fields' could contribute to an even better understanding of superheroes and their political function. Some 130,000 attendees of the annual Comic-Con in San Diego would be a rich source for insights into how audiences navigate their lives between politics and culture in their everyday. Equally, doing elite interviews with the producers of these texts, film producers, screenplay writers, or directors would open yet another dimension to projects like this thesis.

Fourth, theoretically, the interdisciplinary nature of my project aims to open further avenues for political research. Rather than using political representations for their illustrative value might be interesting to see which artefacts lend themselves to what kind of analysis. It will be an important part of future research agendas to explain *why* and *how* cultural artefacts are important for political research.

Future research has to reflect on why it engages with specific cultural artefacts from the perspective of International Relations to not evoke the impression it was all about *fun*. As I have attempted to do, research on the popular culture world politics continuum needs to justify its seriousness by not making the analysis of an artefact a self-fulfilling purpose but rather grapple with the bigger question of *how* the cultural and the political are continuous. The research I have done on the (co-)constitution of the 'War on Terror' through Hollywood's superhero genre can open the way for other researchers to build on this analysis. On the one hand, it will be crucial to further challenge epistemic understandings of violence and terrorism that are prevalent even in academic contexts. It seems a great seduction to fall into the trap of rather than thinking critically about security to adopt and start to believe in concepts shrouded in mythologised, militarised, and violent views of the world. The tendency to conceive crisis as something that needs to be acted upon with force might seem logical in a system that has produced the presidency of Donald Trump, but it must not continue as part of political or academic discourse especially during a time of multiple crises such as climate change, migration, or geopolitical conflict.

Further research can build on my analysis of a specific popular culture artefact and the theoretical and empirical insights this brings. Together with a sophisticated and critical body of literature within International Relations and Critical Security Studies that addresses historical and political issues, it will be important for future research to appreciate the increasing connections between producers and consumers of popular culture especially in a digital world (Crilley, 2020; Robert A. Saunders & Vlad Strukov, 2018).

## Endgame

Ultimately, I have argued that superhero films establish a discourse on terrorism, war, violence, and threat that speaks to their time while remaining broadly dehistoricised and depoliticised. They are dehistoricising because they invoke archmyths of the American nation at almost every turn and insinuate that the periodical crises that America must go through stand in a form of linear continuity with each other on the way to a higher calling of fate. The definition of an enemy and the use of force in order to defeat them might change over time but the mythological charging of American history makes the existential enemy, the apocalyptic battle, and the eventual arrival in paradise endemically dehistorical. At the same time, the discourse remains depoliticised as there is no context for the end-of-the-world battles taking place on the screen. While they do reflect '9/11' aesthetics and narratives and display a coded but at times obvious connection to the 'War on Terror', the events themselves – just like in real life – remain broadly unreflected and therefore unresolved. Rather, America and superheroes are not being questioned but are seen as inherently benign forces. Mistakes might be made but that does not change their inherently good nature. It is thus no surprise that superheroes transcend the political spectrum and international boundaries. When Superman revokes his citizenship or when Captain America turns into Nomad then this is not because America as a nation is rejected but because there are political issues that have to be rectified in order to get back to the *true* nature of America. Lastly, the superheroes and their battles do not find the desired catharsis, but their violent struggles remain futile. In the same way that the 'War on Terror' was constructed, superheroes are doomed to fight battle after battle with the same strategy and never finding ultimate peace. Equally, America is moving from one crisis to another, from one existential battle to the next without any escape in sight.

Superheroes have not been the object of this project simply because it is a fun subject to consider, although having fun is what one usually connects to the idea of watching a film, reading a comic book, or playing a video game. Rather superheroes are the focus because they are known by global audiences, even by those who have never seen a Superman or Batman film, and there are certain expectations connected to them. They also have a long and proven track record of fighting evil by violent means. By using a post-structuralist reading of the 'War on Terror' I have shown how superheroes can operate as

interlocutors, negotiators, and navigators of crisis and violence. They might already carry the key to a better understanding of how security and foreign policy discourses work: They never really solve anything, no matter how much force they use in order to rid the world of evil. Old villains reappear; new ones are invented. On the contrary, they produce more violence and carnage and even if victory is achieved, the cathartic resurrection remains nothing more but a quick, short-term and unsustainable fix. It is the cyclical movement of their struggle, starting from scratch over and over again that might make their fight admirable and relatable in the eyes of many while it is ultimately futile. But they function precisely because of their futility. In the words of Benjamin Barber, against the backdrop of the 'War on Terror' I have aimed to show a basic issue:

I diagnose and criticize the dangerous and all-too American notion – not original with President Bush – that the world is a Manichaeian battlefield painted in blacks and whites, where Evil and Good confront each other at a series of secular Armageddons. I propose rather a world of somber grays, where the good guys are not all of good after all and the bad guys aren't all so bad. Not angels and monsters but frail, muddling, sometimes noble, often deluded creatures of ambiguity, less dreadful than they secretly fear, perhaps, but never so noble as they publicly boast (Barber, 2004, p. 17)

This exemplifies the birth defect of the way America is engaging with its own foreign policy and its thinking about security. It requires an enemy it can fight until the end of time to maintain its purpose, as much as superheroes somehow always know that with the destruction of one enemy there will be a continuity of endless sequels, might this be the 'War on Terror' or the Infinity War saga, the killing of bin Laden or the defeat of Thanos. Ideas of (super-)heroism are not new or in any way unique but the analysis of American superheroes indicates how they reaffirm a specific version of America at a time of national and consecutive crises (McSweeney, 2018; Reynolds, 1992) while having an effect that works on a global scale. As much as superheroes navigate their way between American and global audiences they also play into fantasies of empowerment and resurrection. Not only do superheroes in a neo-liberal time sell audiences the idea of a saviour coming to the rescue (although they definitely do) but they also suggest that everybody can become a superhero by their own means. In times of different and overlapping crises this is surely a powerful fantasy.

As a final thought, maybe it may even be time to listen to the villains in superhero films. As discussed in Chapter 3, at the crossroads of the American 'War on Terror' the Joker addresses the relationship between himself and Batman in *The Dark Knight* after Batman refuses to let him fall to his own death:

You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you, huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, and I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.

This insightful contemplation on the part of the villain illustrates the inevitability of infinite war against evil as long as its inherent logics remain intact as the constructions that they are, a task falling not least to academics. Jean Baudrillard equally analyses the emergence of the conflict of good and evil, especially after '9/11' but furthermore as an overarching myth, arguing that

Good and Evil advance together, as part of the same movement. The triumph of the one does not eclipse the other – far from it. In metaphysical terms, Evil is regarded as an accidental mishap, but this axiom, from which all the Manichean forms of the struggle of Good against Evil derive, is illusory (2003, p. 13).

Making the villain responsible for the ills of this world will not be enough, on the contrary, it is highly counter-productive. Rather, what will be crucial is to deconstruct mythologies and tales of heroism against the backdrop of a post-modern world. Ideas and concepts of heroism enable the creation of evermore heroes on screen and within political culture, but their creation is not sustainable. The permanent and fast collapse and reinvigoration of heroisms create a vicious cycle that leaves little space for the engagement with systemic questions about reasons for, developments of and solutions to violent conflict.

The End...? (Go to page 186)

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**Music fades...**

**Screen turns to black...**

**The audience sits expectantly...**

**The screen flickers as words reappear....**

**April 2018**

*Avengers: Infinity War* is released. Once the villainous titan Thanos has acquired the Infinity Gauntlet the six Infinity Stones he snaps his fingers and half of all life in the universe disintegrates. In a shocking sequence we see beloved superhero characters vanishing into thin air, affecting people at random. Thanos' insistence that the victims chosen at random possibly makes the situation more horrifying, precisely because it could affect anyone. It is almost like a terror attack that kills random victims rather than having a specific target. Or a virus that rapidly and randomly spreads, killing half the universe.

At the end of the film, Captain America and Black Widow are looking at a holographic world map with cases of missing people being recorded, showing that over three billion people are missing globally with numbers continuously going up, being updated second by second. The sheer dimension of the event creates a sense of hopelessness and trauma for the superheroes. For a lack of a better description, they merely describe the situation as a nightmare. The culprit in all of this might be Thanos but the randomness of the act and the arbitrariness with which people are just being ripped out of existence goes beyond what superheroes – and audiences – are usually confronted with. The brutality and scale exceeding anybody's comprehension. In cinemas across the world, nobody moves, nobody speaks – we are transfixed and shocked...

**CUT TO...**

**April 2019**

*Avengers: Endgame* is released. The film begins with Hawkeye discovering his whole family have disappeared into thin air – snapped out of existence. The ideal of the American nuclear family and the source of safety and solace for the Avengers is gone.

Five years later, the world still struggles to cope with losing half of all life – friends, family, even their heroes. We see a deserted Manhattan Island – the scene of not only '9/11' but so many of the Avengers' epic battles to protect humanity. The camera pans over a deserted baseball stadium symbolising the death of America and all that is normal and everyday. The world is living in a permanent state of exception. A vast monument in San Francisco, the Wall of the Vanished, evoke a sense of heroism but also deep loss and despair for the fallen citizens that turned to dust.

Black Widow is sitting at the Avengers HQ, still clearly suffering from the trauma and her crisis of identity is palpable. In a gloomy conversation with Captain America, they address the surprising ways the world has changed, perhaps offering a glimmer of some good that may have come from Thanos' drastic action:

Captain America: You know I saw a pod of whales when I was coming up the bridge.

Black Widow: In the Hudson?

Captain America: There's fewer ships, cleaner water.

Nature may be recovering due to reduced human activity, but Black Widow fails to see the bright side of it.

**CUT TO...**

**April 2020**

No superhero films are released. The cinemas remain empty and closed as part of efforts to contain

the novel Covid-19 virus. For the first time in 10 years there will not be a Marvel Cinematic Universe film released in global cinemas. Very little is still known about the level of infection, lethality, and long-term effects of what has become a global pandemic but the spread from country to country and from community to community has been rapid. No-one seems safe. Millions are being infected, tens of thousands are dying. Political leaders argue with scientists and medical experts over what should be done. The streets of usually bustling cities across the globe are empty as cultural and sporting venues are closed, whole societies locked down and people isolate and social distance in their homes. It is as though some supervillain has snapped their fingers and suddenly, we are all at risk. Covid-19 affects everybody, and illness and death become our everyday reality. Themes of heroism are being invoked, usually referring to doctors and nurses as well as other 'frontline workers.' Street artist Banksy demonstrates that in a lockdown sketch showing a child playing with a doll of a superheroic nurse while his Batman and Spider-Man dolls are cast aside in a bin. Reports of returning marine animals in the canals of Venice evoke idyllic images of wildlife recovering as humanity goes into retreat.

We have no reference points. Almost no-one has experienced anything like this before. The shock and trauma are palpable. Indeed, the empty streets and rising death rates are "just like something in the movies". Those opening scenes of *Avengers: Endgame* suddenly have new meaning and are perhaps brought back to the minds of global audiences as they grapple for a frame of reference for their current experience. It's almost as though the script for the Covid-19 pandemic was written before it happened. Just as there was no real-life script to make sense of '9/11', Americans had to turn to film and popular culture in order to make sense of it. So again, with the coronavirus pandemic. *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame* can now be read as pandemic films, giving an interpretive lens not only to Americans but cinemagoers across the world, and almost pre-empting the traumatising events of 2020. Filmic meanings are fluid as readings change over time with the conclusion of the *Infinity Saga* now being perceived very differently in 2020 than they were at the time of their release. Popular culture and superhero films again predict and anticipate crisis through a seemingly endless period of apocalyptic events. The significance of the superhero genre and its co-constitutive relationship with the *real* world has perhaps never been more apparent.

## Superheroes will return...